

A THOUGHT IN TIME *By* LEROY YERXA

fantastic

ADVENTURES

FEBRUARY
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OUTLAW
QUEEN *of* VENUS
By
WALLACE WEST

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1944

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

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VOLUME 6
NUMBER 1

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

SOME months ago Donald Wollheim, who is an authority on good science and fantasy fiction, acted as judge in selecting a number of the best classics in modern science fiction, and selected two from the back files of *Amazing Stories*, our sister magazine. One was by Wallace West, and was titled "The Last Man." Although Mr. West has done nothing for us in nearly ten years, this event urged him to repeat—and repeat he did! We point with pride to our cover story this month as a very fine story indeed, by a very fine author. It is "Outlaw Queen Of Venus" and we think it is even better than his classic "The Last Man." Read it and see.

CONTRARY to our usual policy, this issue we have two cover stories—one on the back cover. The painting, by James B. Settles, illustrates a scene from "Appointment With The Past" by Lee Francis. This author, for your information, scored a tremendous hit with his story in the last issue "Witch of Blackfen Moor" to follow up his equally smashing success with "Citadel Of Hate" in our June, 1943 issue. Thus we are proud to present another yarn by one of the most promising authors to come up from the ranks in recent years.

SPEAKING of promising authors, we find ourselves with the skull-swelling task of announcing two in one month! And you'll fall flat on your face, as we did (with the aid of some powerful pushing on the part of the readers!), when you learn his name. Yes, it's Leroy Yerxa! Here's a lad who crashed in in great style with his first story, then went through two years of effort, some of it under a barrage from the readers, that elicited nothing except perhaps our admiration for his tenacious and bulldogged determination. Then, at long last, the flood began. Letters, letters, letters! Okay, Leroy, you win. We, as editors, smashed you down time and again, until any other man would have given up in despair at so much re-writing. But you just grinned and went on. You quit your job to give full time to writing. With four children, that takes guts—more than we've got. Readers, you can't imagine the sigh of relief we now draw, faced with your comment on his stories. We admit we bought a lot of stories maybe because of those four kids—but the readers don't rave through sympathy! But that's the way editors gamble. This time we win! And congrats to Leroy Yerxa, a name you'll be

seeing again and again! This issue it's "A Thought In Time."

THIS issue we have a story without an author! We're trying to pin it on Scott Feldman, but with little success. But it's all explained in an editorial footnote after the story, so we won't dwell on it here. But it'll give you something to think about! The title is "Letter To The Editor"—and what a letter!

SADLY we present the last story in our files by David Wright O'Brien, who is now a gunner in Uncle Sam's biggest plane, the B-29, which, by the time this sees print, ought to be making history slapping down the Nazis and the Japs from distances that make our head swim to contemplate. Yes, that B-29 is a ship such as even science fiction never dreamed about! The story is "The Place Is Familiar" and that might be applicable to Tokio later on, insofar as O'Brien and the B-29 are concerned!

"WHAT'S In A Name?" asks Berkeley Livingston. Anyway, that's the title to his newest story in this issue. We think you'll like it as well as the Finlay illustration accompanying it. Incidentally, this magazine (and *Amazing Stories*) are the only magazines in which you'll find the work of this famous artist, since he's gone to war. All due to our foresight in buying a stock from him, done without stories previously being written. Thus, as we have the stories done, the illustrations will appear. Keep your eye open for them.

THE final story in the McGivern-McCune "Three Musketeers" feud is in this issue. It's "The Musketeers In Paris." We think you'll like it as well as the first two stories about these characters.

BY the way, both William P. McGivern and David Wright O'Brien dropped in on us for coffee, while enroute to their war duties, having finished training—and we never saw two lads who looked better. Our secretary fairly swooned with adulation and we felt nothing but sheer admiration. Losing forty pounds certainly did things to them! O'Brien is doing a local radio show as part of his duties for the air force!

(Continued on page 34)

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OUTLAW QUEEN of VENUS

By WALLACE WEST

"SO YOU'RE on the Venus run, eh?" Old Tom polished the Moon Station Cafe bar and squinted at the nervous youth in Space Patrol uniform who was nursing along his "ham and" as though it might be his last.

"Yeh."

"Goin' to Wildoatia, eh, captain," persisted the counter man.

"Yeh." His customer looked up slowly. "Why?"

"Oh, a fellow just gets lonesome to talk to somebody. How are things back home?"

"Dull."



"Quick!" she panted. "We've got to make it to solid footing before the clouds cover the sun again!"

The destiny of every downtrodden man on Venus hung on the woman's wit of Sadie Thompson, tough gamin of a tougher world!

"They finished that Sahara irrigation job yet?"

"How'd you know?" The youngster jumped up, overturning his chair.

"Don't know nothin,' sir . . . Want some more coffee 'fore you fire off? You won't get much of it out there."

"You mean . . . ?" The other righted

his chair and sat down on the edge of it.

"Oh, there's plenty of food . . . if you're lucky, but it usually tastes like nothing a human should eat."

"You sound as if you'd been on Venus."

"Have." Tom was polishing the spotless bar again.

"You . . . you didn't make your fortune, then?"

"Made it, and lost it."

"Look," said the captain when the silence became unbearable, "would you mind telling me what you found? I . . . I never met anybody before that's been to Wildoatia. Read a lot of stories, but . . ."

Old Tom stuffed his cloth under the bar and drew himself a cup of black coffee.

"No," he said after due consideration. "They won't let me . . . Want some pie?"

"I—I guess so. Apple."

"Here y'are. . . . How old would you say I am?"

"Oh," the officer was trying to be polite, "about sixty."

"Forty-one!"

"Gee!"

"Twenty years ago I was working on the Sahara Project. . . . They'd just started it. I was a high-strung kid with plenty of hair and a flat belly and given to reading Stevenson and Asher and Kipling 'stead of spending my nights studying engineering. I can remember as if it were yesterday how I used to dream about pirates and wars and stratosphere dog fights like they had in the good old days. You know what I mean?"

"Yeh." The youngster prodded his canned pie thoughtfully. "And beautiful wicked women and pleasure cities and making a million francs at roulette and blowing it in at the races. Sure. Go on."

"They used to talk about how conquering the Sahara was man's greatest adventure since he'd reached the planets . . . how the next job was to make the poles blossom." Tom eyed his guest sharply. "But it didn't stick, did it?" The other fell into the trap.

"Uh huh. Every day you go out

and burn that channel another mile through the sand. And every night you come back dead tired and have to study, study, study to keep from lagging behind the rest of the crew. No wars. . . . Not even a Bedouin left. No excitement except in books and telies. You blame me for getting fed up too?"

"Nope," said the other. "You're just an atavar like I used to be. Can't help yourself. Don't fit into this collectivized solar system any more than you do into that uniform. . . . Now, now! Put up that gun! I won't turn you in and somebody might get suspicious if they saw you wavin' it around."

"Guess if you'd wanted to turn me in I couldn't have stopped you," muttered the kid as he shoved his automatic back into a shoulder holster. "I reckon you're right about my being an atavar. The Commissioner said so too. Talked to me like a Dutch Uncle for hours. Tried to get me to see the error of my ways. When I kept insisting I wanted to go to Venus and sow some wild oats he finally had to make me a pass with a one-year return privilege."

"**F**AT chance you'll ever get to come back. The Big Shots will see to that. Say, how come the government didn't ship you out on a freighter like they do the rest of the incorrigibles?"

"They were going to, but I . . ." His mouth snapped shut.

"You nicked a uniform and a patrol boat in some repair yard. And now you're holding your breath while she's being refueled for fear they'll discover it and helio you down. Well, I wish you luck."

"You almost sound as if you'd like to go along. . . . There's room."

"Nope. I'm too old. Heart can't stand the acceleration any more. I'm stuck here for life. But you have my

thanks just the same, Mr.—"

"Name's Frank."

"Well look, Frank. You got any money?"

"Money? You mean . . . ?"

"Yeh. Money. Spelled m-o-n-e-y—Gold. Silver. In other words, cash."

"Where'd I get money? It hasn't been used for 200 years."

"It's being used every day on Venus. Know what they do to incors who land without any? Chuck 'em in a concentration camp and make 'em work like Billy-be-damned for a year—until their return pass expires—and then they work 'em some more, just for luck."

"But I thought . . ."

"So did I. But Wildoatia's no land of chivalry, ladies in distress and knights on horseback, 'cepting one that's sort of a legend. Not any more. Times are tough there. And the Big Shots are tough. Tougher'n anybody you ever ran up against, even the commissars. You've got to be tough too, or you go under."

"Excepting one? What's that?"

"Oh, they tell of a gal dressed in red, wearing a mask, toting a gun and riding hell-bent-for-leather on a winged horse. Hell, there never was a horse on Venus, much less a winged nag!"

"It's a strange world . . ." said Frank dubiously.

Old Tom snorted. "Not *that* legend. I *know*. But to get back to real things. About you now. . . ."

"But what'll I do? I can't quit now. The fellows would laugh me off the earth."

"Stick around." Old Tom climbed off his stool and moved heavily through a swinging door which led to his living quarters. He returned shortly and tossed a clinking money belt onto the bar. "There you are. My fortune, as you called it. Five thousand smack-ers. Never knew why I brought 'em

back. No good to me on Earth or the Moon."

"Gee. Thanks."

"Now look." The counter man was all business. "If you land with a patrol ship and that money for a stake you'll have a chance—to survive, at least. But you won't be there five hours before someone'll try to take them both away from you, see? It's tooth and claw, free competition, no holds barred and devil take the hindmost on Venus. . . . Can you handle that gun?"

"Pretty well. I used to practice drawing and shooting when I should have been studying."

"Fine. First man that makes a pass at you, don't argue and don't wait for him to draw. . . . Shoot him between the eyes."

A door banged open and a grease-smeared mechanic stuck his head into the lunchroom.

"Ship's ready for blasting, captain," he called.

"Two things more, son." Old Tom leaned over the counter and gripped his new friend's shoulder. "First, remember that hate, greed, envy and suspicion are cardinal virtues in Wildoatia and that pity and honesty are unforgivable sins, while murder is the only logical end to a quarrel. Second, if the going gets too tough, look up Sadie Thomp at Venusport City and whisper to her that Tom Griggs—that's me—is a friend of yours. Happy landings."

FEELING as though he had just been tossed into an icy pool, Frank trudged slowly out of the lunch room and into the vast hemispherical hangar. There his little globe-shaped space patrol lay in the smallest cradle, aimed at the automatic "shutter" which served both as a means of egress and to keep out the cold of space.

"All ready, captain." The chief mechanic saluted Frank's stolen uniform. "The orbit's almost perfect. You won't have to make more than a one degree correction when you wake. Blast off in ten minutes. Correct, sir?"

"Correct." He saluted in return, then climbed into the cramped cabin, laced himself carefully into the anti-shock hammock and swallowed three Suspensio tablets.*

As the drug took effect and his heartbeats became fainter and farther apart Frank thought hazily of Tom Grigg's concluding words. The adventure telies had never pictured anything like this. No wonder the government frowned on them. Had the Old West and the Last War been like that too? Looked as if he'd made a bad mistake. Oh, well. . . . Should have written down that—name—Sadie—Thompson. . . . Some blousy boarding house keeper, probably—with heart of gold. . . . Mustn't forget—between—the—eyes.

When he came out from under the Suspensio the chronometer indicated that thirty-two days had passed. Moving as stiffly as a rusty hinge, he unlaced himself from the cradle and staggered weakly to the observation port. The forward rockets were spurting at two-minute intervals and Venus' mysterious, cloud-covered surface blotted out all but a narrow margin of the round, cross-haired window.

He studied the charts carefully. The Moonport super had said he would need to make a one-degree correction. He shifted the quadrants gingerly until the disc below was exactly centered. Then he slumped into a chair and reached for a can of tomatoes to stay his ravening thirst and hunger. This at least was a

lot simpler than blasting off from Earth, where he had had no cradle to start from and had streaked all over the sky before managing to chart a course for the Moon.

If the super was right, the patrol ship would break through the cloud barrier directly over Venusport landing field, but—he sat up with a start—did he want to land at Venusport? Old Tom's warning rang in his ears: "You won't be there five hours before someone'll try to take them both away from you, see?"

Slowly his hand reached out and shifted the quadrants. Might as well take no chances. An out-of-the-way field was safer.

FIVE hours later he plunged into those clouds—clouds that floated so many leagues above the planet that all water vapor was frozen in them, a fact which had delayed exploration for decades because astronomers insisted that no life would be found beneath.

The observation port went gray. Down, down the ship sank, still decelerating so fast that Frank felt as though he weighed a ton. What if the cloud bank went right down to the ground, he wondered. Would the automatic land her, or would she be flattened like a pancake?

Just as the suspense threatened to drive him mad, the woolly blanket whipped away and he caught sight of a weird, half-lighted world below.

Master of the situation once more, he cut out the automatics and drifted her down by hand to ground with a sodden thud at last in a thicket of sickly-yellow shrubs at the edge of an incredible, slowly writhing forest.

Panic threatened to seize him again. What lurking terrors were outside? This land of mist and deceptive, wavering distances bore some resemblance to

* These tablets make space travel possible by inducing suspended animation and thereby eliminating the necessity for fantastic cargoes of food, water and air.—Ed.

the Hollywood-inspired-and-produced adventure telies, with their papier mache reptiles threshing through animated jungles. The only things missing were the frowning fortresses and glittering pleasure cities which should have dotted the landscape, and the thrill of adventure which Griggs had jolted out of him.

Grimly he slipped into a bullet-resistant cape, took his prized possession, a forbidden sub-machine gun, set the air lock spinning open and put foot on Wil-doatia with all the boldness he could muster.

"Whang!"

A giant hand seemed to grip him by the shoulder and spin him round. He slipped to his knees, then sprawled face downward, still gripping the gun in his unparalyzed hand. That bullet had come from the edge of the slime-coated forest, and, but for his cape, would have broken his shoulder. He waited with pumping heart.

Minutes later a face peered from behind one of the nearer trees.

"Rat! Tat! Tat!"

The face vanished.

Again he waited. Nothing happened so he crawled forward. Soon he was kneeling beside a sprawled, bloody and almost naked—girl.

As he stared at his handiwork a white tentacle slid out of the mud and curled lovingly around the stranger's ankle. Another followed to fasten itself on her wrist.

As the roots bit into her flesh the "dead" girl came back to her senses and screamed as she struggled to escape. Although she must have seen Frank she made no appeal for help. Instead her pale blue eyes focused above him in a sort of gleeful anticipation.

Sensing some approaching danger, the latter dodged.

With a whiplike crack a branch

flashed through the air and coiled around the place where he had been standing.

"Damn you," gasped the girl. "I hoped——" She fainted.

FRANK ran back to the ship, grabbed a machete and returned to hack at those slowly-contracting roots. They writhed under his attack, let go their holds at last and slooped back into the muck. Snatching the girl in his arms—she was light as a feather—he carried her to the ship. Starting to take her inside, he remembered her unprovoked attack, went through the air lock and came back with a first aid kit.

The stranger was only creased along the side of the skull and revived quickly.

"I don't know nothin'" she whimpered as she opened those disturbing eyes. "Won't do no good to torture me."

"No one's going to torture you."

"It's not—it's not the camp again? I couldn't. . . . Oh please kill me, mister. . . . Please!"

"Look," he snapped. "You know this uniform, don't you?"

"Sure." She struggled to sit up and finally made it with his help. "It's the Space Patrol."

"You know the Patrol doesn't torture people, don't you?"

"Yeh—but what are you doin' way out here? The Patrol has no authority except in the interstellar settlement at Venusport." She gripped his coat lapels in great excitement.

"Lost my bearings," he lied. "Had to land here until . . . Oh no you don't, you little viper!"

The girl had whipped his automatic out of its holster but the shot aimed at his heart went wild when he knocked up her arm.

"Damn it all," she wailed. "Oh damn

it all, why ain't I a man?" Flinging herself on the yellow grass, she beat it with her fists in an ecstasy of hysteria until a few well-placed smacks brought her back to sniffling sanity.

"Listen, you young hellcat!" He shook her till her teeth rattled, then stopped shame-facedly as he saw how weak she was. "We can't go on like this. Are you going to behave yourself?"

"Why should I?" She grinned at him impishly through her tears. "You've got a spaceship and I need it. Only way to keep me from getting it is to shoot me between the eyes."

"Why—why that's what Tom Griggs told me."

"Tom Griggs! . . . You said Tom Griggs?" She made a grab for him again but he fended her off.

"Yes, I said Tom Griggs. Know him?"

"Uh huh." She looked down at her dirty toes and wriggled them thoughtfully. "Tell you what," she began at last, still keeping her eyes averted. "I—I've got to go some place in a hurry. If you'll take me, I won't steal your lousy ship till tomorrow."

Frank started to laugh, but broke off as he saw her fists clench.

"It's a bargain," he choked at last. "Let's shake on it."

"Not on your life!" She put both grimy hands behind her. "You're not going to get me to break any laws."

"How about something to eat, then?"

"Eat? You mean you'll actually give me some of your grub? I ain't got no money."

"Of course I'll give it to you. You look starved."

"Stranger." Her voice was solemn. "You're not long for this world."

SHE wolfed down the canned rations he set out until he thought she

would burst. When every plate was clean she leaned back against the ship, patted her round tummy approvingly and lighted one of his cigarettes.

"I ate too much," she sighed.

"Must have been some time since you had a square meal."

"Been some time since I met a damned fool," she grinned.

"What *is* this? Back on Earth it's—"

"Share and share alike," she mimicked. "Well, in Wildoatia it's different, Buddy. The planet was colonized by folks who didn't like each other. Here you hang on to what you've got, which hasn't been much of late, and swipe whatever you can. Otherwise you get rubbed out, see? Why, that gun I pot-shoted you with . . . I got it by climbing a tree and dropping a rock on a Big Shot's head."

"You said you had to get some place in a rush," he changed the unpleasant subject. "What's up your sleeves?"

"Ain't got a sleeve," she grimaced, "or a shirt either, your eyes keep on reminding me."

"Sorry," he flushed. "Here. Take mine."

"Thanks, Sir Galahad." She pulled the proffered garment over her head and tucked the tails into what remained of her shorts. "If you weren't a sap who believes in honesty and that sort of bunk I wouldn't tell you what I'm gonna, even if you concentrated me. But here it is: I've got a straight tip there's been a U-235 strike up at Dead Man's Delta—the first one in three years—I wanna stake a claim."

"But——"

"Oh, I know what you're thinkin'—the Big Shots get the best claims. But they're too proud to soil their lily white hands on anything but a bonanza so somebody with a ship, supplies and guns might clean up and get away."

"See here, though. If I don't trust

you and you think I'll double cross you, how can we work together?"

"Hmm. I hadn't thought of that. In fact," she admitted with a disarming wink, "I guess I was still figuring on bumping you off tomorrow."

"But if a uranium rush is anything like it's pictured in the telies, two people working together would have a much better chance of cashing in." He found himself dropping into her pseudo-western-gangster patois.

"Yes, but the Big Shots wouldn't stand for it. If they catch anybody teaming up they blast 'em. Concentrating's too good for 'em, they say."

"We could pretend to be enemies."

"Sure. And you, you big dope, would live up to your bargain while I'd be a darned fool if I didn't shoot you in the back soon as we'd made a pile." Unexpectedly her face puckered up and she started to cry. Forgetting that she had tricked him before, Frank slipped one arm around her shaking shoulders. She huddled against him and wailed.

"DON'T men and women ever team up in this god-forsaken world?" he tried again. "After all——"

"Oh, the Big Shots have their women," she snarled in sudden fury. "I mean, we're their women, for a night or a week or a month till they get tired of us. But if we find somebody—somebody like you . . ." and she wailed again, "why the cop says 'Break it up' and you gotta. . . ."

"Why?"

"Why!" She recoiled in amazement. "Because it's the law, like no handshakes and no kisses and no partnerships."

"But doesn't anyone ever break the law?"

"A few do . . . once."

"I see." His flesh was crawling. Then: "Who are these Big Shots?"

"Oh, descendants of the gangsters, fascists, fifth columnists and, well, Big Shots, who were expelled from Earth after the Last War. I've heard a lot of people wanted to kill 'em outright but others argued that, like buzzards and scammers and jitbugs, they must have some use or they wouldn't have been created, so they sent them here to work out their salvation or kill each other off."

"So you have to be born a Big Shot?"

"Oh no. That's why the incors keep coming. You just get a million dollars, some way and you're in, with all rights and privileges." She brightened up amazingly and rubbed her eyes dry with her knuckles. "You see, that's why I want to get to Dead Man's Delta. I've already swiped a hundred thousand bucks and I figured that with what I might make out of this strike and your ship. . . . Oh! I shouldn't have said that! She clapped both hands over her mouth.

"I'll say you shouldn't." He rose and turned toward the air lock. "So long, kid rattlesnake."

"Wait!" she gulped. "Please. I . . ."

"You what?" He wavered.

"I'll promise to be bad. I mean I won't ever touch your old ship if you'll take me to the Delta and I'll be your partner even if it does mean I'll go to hell when I die."

For a moment he struggled to understand her weird reversal of right and wrong, then shook his head.

"Nope. I'd never be sure you weren't going to double cross me, or that you wouldn't, well, kind of forget."

She looked at him, perplexed by a problem which evidently never before had confronted her.

"Well," she said at last, "if I told you where I've got my hundred thousand cached. . . ."

"That would just encourage you to

knife me before I might double cross you."

"Whew!" She ran slim fingers through her mop of tawny curls. "Can't you suggest anything?"

"Do you know Sadie Thompson at Venusport?" he snapped.

The girl turned white and seemed about to faint again.

"Y-yes," she breathed at last.

"If you'll post that hundred thousand as bond with her, or something. . . ."

"If you . . . if you're . . ." She stopped and looked at the twisting forest as though fearful it might hear, then whispered, "If you know Tom Griggs and Sadie Thompson you don't need any bond. They'd tear me to pieces if I even laid a finger on you."

"They? You mean the Big Shots?"

"You know I don't mean the Big Shots," she giggled, jumping to her feet. "Come on if you're coming. We're out to beat the mob to Dead Man's Delta."

Marveling, but somehow trusting her implicitly now, Frank followed her toward the lock.

AS THE ship took the air, climbed and blasted southward just within the fringes of the lowest cloud layer, the waif presented her plan of campaign.

"Will this thing float?" was her first question.

"Sure."

"Then we'll blast a hole in the swamp with the forward rockets and hide the ship there. Water and muck will pour back and cover everything but the top hatch so the Big Shot'll never find her. Then we'll wait for a rift in the clouds and . . ."

"But rifts are mighty few, aren't they?" Frank objected. "We may have to wait for weeks. Why?"

"You'll see, greenhorn," she grinned at him as she tucked some more of his big shirt under her belt. "Even if we wait we'll be way ahead of the mob. Nobody but Big Shots are allowed to use planes. The prospectors are hoofing it like I was."

Three hours later they soared above the steaming delta from which the great Squar River plunged over a thousand foot precipice into the foaming Yellow Sea. Under other circumstances Frank would have been awestruck by the spectacle which dwarfed Niagara to toylike proportions, but now he had become infected with the girl's evident terror and spent most of his time watching for BS planes.

"How come it's called Dead Man's Delta?" he found leisure to inquire.

For answer she pointed to a tremendous landslide which at some recent date had forced the river to change its course about ten miles above its mouth.

"Used to be a big air terminal for the north-south route under there," she explained. "Lots of dead men . . . and women too, when the slide was over. Now the crazy fools have built the new diggin's practically in the old channel because it's so well drained. See it?"

Frank looked down as she pointed and saw the settlement, a ragged scar on a valley from which the jungle shrank away as if fearing infection.

At that moment a blinding rain squall swept without warning over the countryside and blotted out all but its most striking outlines.

"Now!" cried the girl. "Drop straight and quick into that marsh between the river and the cliffs just above the village. Don't blast till you're too low to be seen. The rockets must sound like thunder."

"We'll probably break our necks," her companion muttered, but did as he

was told. The ship whooshed downward through the rubbery atmosphere, brought up short with a spine-shattering jerk as he gunned the forward rockets full blast for the fraction of a second, then squished into the deep muck.

"NOW what?" Frank rubbed an elbow which he had cracked against the control panel. "Do we hibernate?"

"No, no." She was dancing with excitement. "Breaks in the clouds often follow heavy downpours. Let's get our gear together near the hatch and be ready to make a break for it."

"What gear?" He looked about helplessly.

"Your Tommy gun and my rifle, silly. Canned food. Blankets. Machetes. We may not be able to get back, you see, and we'll have to pay through the nose for anything we don't bring with us. Hurry. And get into some other clothes. That uniform will get you shot on sight out here."

They made up two heavy packs and leaned them against the short ladder which led to the hatch. Then Frank climbed up, unscrewed the cover and pushed it upward.

Wham! A yellow tentacle struck the opening a resounding blow, curled like a giant finger and started questing down the ladder. The ship rocked in its bed of ooze and a little water slopped over the edge of the hatch.

"Quick! Cut it off before it sinks us," screamed the girl.

Grabbing machetes, they leaped forward and hacked at the living cable until it parted. The stump snapped back while the severed portion writhed like a dying snake on the control room floor, emitting a nauseous ichor and still trying to strike at them.

"That was close," she panted. "I

was sure all the nearest ones would be scorched by our rocket blast. We're safe now, I think."

"Hadn't I better close the hatch? There may be others."

"They only strike at moving objects. Besides, with the cover closed we mightn't be able to see the sun in time."

Almost as she finished speaking the hatch seemed to turn itself into the door of a blast furnace. Blinding light and a wave of withering heat smote them like physical blows.

"The sun's out," cried the girl. "Up with you. If there's enough clear sky we'll make a break for it."

They tumbled up the ladder . . . and beheld a scene of madness.

All about them the saffron jungle was thrashing and squirming like some protean animal in its death agony. Branches whirled up like mighty arms and, descending, beat the mud into froth. Here and there hairy vines strove with each other, forming epic statuesque groups, remindful of Laöcoon. Only where the rocket blast had seared a hole in the matted vegetation was there a semblance of quiet, although deadly reptiles and other creatures too hideous to look upon were twisting and striking at each other in the muck surrounding the ship.

"My God," whispered Frank, feeling the hair on his head stir. "Looks like a scene from Revelations . . . Seven heads, ten horns and all the rest of it. What's going on?"

"It's the ultra violet rays in the sunshine. Venusian plant-animals . . . or animal-plants, whichever way you prefer to look at it . . . spend 99 per cent of their lives in deep shadow. So they go positively wild when over-stimulated during periods of clear skies. By the way," she squinted at a long, jagged

tear in the miles-high mass of clouds through which a monstrous sun glared at them, "you'd better wear your heaviest helmet and your darkest glasses when we make our dash. This light will skin you in five minutes if you don't."

"MAKE our dash?" he marveled. "Through that hell?"

"Sure." Nonchalantly she slid down the ladder and started adjusting her pack. "They can't take it. They'll all be dead drunk before you can shake a lamb's tail."

"But how . . .?" He hooked his arms through the loops of his own fifty-pound load.

"You'll see." She was taking delight in his bewilderment. Then her toothy, pixie face became dead serious. "When we get ashore, remember we mustn't be seen together. That would give the game away and we'd be rubbed out with no questions asked. So you take one path and I'll take the high-road. After that, don't be surprised at anything that happens."

"But what about the claim," he protested. "How do I go about filing it . . . and how do you mine U-235 anyway?"

"Well, you *are* a tenderfoot," she jeered. "As for the claim, you just drive your stakes where the Big Shots let you and then shoot anybody . . . and I mean anybody . . . who tries to set foot on your land. And don't bite off a bigger claim than you can defend night and day. As for mining the ore. I thought you were an engineer."

"I am, but on Earth we never get 235 without using a cyclotron or klystron on 238.5." He was feeling foolish at the knowledge displayed by this half-clad, half-starved girl.

"That's where the Big Shots struck it rich. After they had looted and then

exterminated the unlucky natives, they discovered that Venus had quite a bit of pure isotope 235. They use it as valuta in their interstellar trade. Otherwise the poor goofs would starve, I do believe."

"And the earth would have to manufacture its own rocket fuel at ten times the present cost."

"Yeh. Might be a good thing, too."

"You said Venus *had* quite a bit of 235. Does that mean it's used up?"

"Uh huh. Dead Man's Delta is the first big strike in years. If it doesn't pan out, the Big Shots may have to go to work and really develop this planet if they can. They're down to their last space yachts right now." She glanced at him as though about to say something more, then quickly changed the subject. "The ore here looks just about the same as ordinary pitchblends and carnotite . . . dark blue with a pitchy feel in igneous rocks or canary yellow specks found in sandstone."

"How did you find out about the strike?"

"None of your business."

"Excuse me. How about refining the ore?"

"Certainly. You can sell your stuff to the Big Shots' reduction plant or you can fine it yourself and sell them the pure metal. Either way, you'll get gyped unless you're robbed outright. The reduction process is fairly simple. You use aqua regia, sodium carbonate and sodium hydroxide. Main thing to remember is to keep pure 235 away from water or moisture of any kind if you want to stay in one piece. As you ought to know, water acts on it like a detonator on a hand grenade. Now come on. Things should have quieted down upstairs."

THE silence of death surrounded them when they scrambled up the

ladder. The palmlike fronds and massive vines had given over their gymnastics and now lay supine across the mud which already had begun to steam in the goshawful heat.

"Everything looks cooked . . . or frostbitten," Frank marveled.

"Don't stand there gawking. This sunshine won't last. Get going."

"But how? I'm no mud puppy."

"That branch . . . the one we chopped in two. See? It's lying across the mud with the end almost touching the ship. Jump for it."

"And if I miss?"

"Nothing will bite you. The snakes and scamours are burrowing deep in the mud to escape the sunshine."

Taking a deep breath which he hoped would not be his last, Frank obeyed. Of course his feet slipped on the slimy bark and he jackknifed into the tepid ooze.

"See if you can do better, you imp of Satan," he snarled at the laughing girl as he managed to gain a kneeling position on the faintly writhing branch.

To his astonishment she vaulted over his head, landed on her feet, balanced like a ropewalker despite her pack and started toward "shore" as confidently as though she had been walking a railroad rail. Grimly he edged after her.

"You'll never make it that way," frowned his guide as she mounted the bunch of gelatinous, mouldy leaves into which the base of their branch descended. "The clouds will be back in fifteen minutes and we've got an eighth of a mile to go. On your feet, greenhorn, and run, if you know what's good for you."

Wiping the mud off his face, Frank stood erect and did his best. It wouldn't have been so bad if the branches and vines, many of them a foot thick, had lain quiet. But they

persisted in twitching and flinching in their coma. And frequently they humped themselves up vaguely and dumped him back in the swamp.

Nevertheless he made fair progress, although the heat and stench of decayed vegetation was now becoming unbearable. Also he could feel the ultraviolet rays beating through his coat, parboiling him and at the same time making him as dizzy as one too many highballs.

He was within sight of higher ground when the sun switched off like an electric bulb, leaving his contracted pupils almost blinded. A stinging premonition of danger sent him racing along that prostrate fronds like a structural steel worker on a skyscraper skeleton. And, as his sight became normal again, he saw there was reason for his fear. In the shadowy darkness the jungle was coming quickly back to ferocious life.

"Step on it, greenhorn!" he heard the girl screaming far ahead. At the same moment the gnarled vine which he had been using as a bridge, jerked angrily to one side and he plunged once more into the slime. But now, he found, it was only about a foot deep, so he sloshed ahead rather than searching for firmer footing.

The jungle was groaning and murmuring like some mammoth, many-lunged animal. Sucking sounds, loud reports and ghostly creakings set his teeth on edge and his hair on end.

"Hurry! Hurry!" He could see the girl jumping up and down in a frenzy of excitement at the edge of the jungle. "It's waking up. Step on it." She was actually wringing her hands.

Frank called upon his aching muscles for the final dash. He dodged between the dripping fronds which were rising like blades of grass which have been stepped on, hacked wildly at clawing

things which rose to bar his path, plunged like a halfback through the last fringe of vegetation . . . and crashed forward on his face as a vice-like grip fastened itself on his ankle!

DESPERATELY he struggled to retrieve his machete, which had flown from his hand. The rubbery thing which had him let him crawl forward a pace or two. Then it contracted and began dragging him back into the ooze. At the same time a stinging sensation warned him that the tentacle was sucking blood through his skin.

He became aware of the girl, standing stock still now, not more than ten feet away, but continuing to wring her hands.

"Kick me the machete," he panted. "I can cut myself free in no time."

She did not answer nor move, but stared over and beyond him along the shore.

"What's the matter with you kid?" he croaked as once more a deadly premonition chilled his spine. "We're partners, you know."

Still no answer. But, as he was inched slowly backward, she advanced a step as though pulled by strings.

The pain in his legs . . . good God, both his legs now . . . was becoming unbearable. He snatched at a nearby bush to stay his inexorable progress only to feel the thing slick through his grasp like a wet glove as it retreated underground.

"Help me," he pleaded.

"I can't." The girl's voice was firm and clear. "The law says . . . never . . . help . . . people in distress . . . under pain of . . . death."

"To hell with such a . . ." There was a sharp tug. He slipped a foot deeper into the jungle. There was mud in his mouth. He strained his

neck upward till it cracked and his head was above water. "Sadie," he coughed. "Sadie . . . Thompson."

FRANK recovered consciousness with a start. By all rights he should be drowned, yet the sound of strange voices was in his ears. Through slitted lids he looked up at two men who were laughing harshly as they stared at him in his muddy bed at the edge of the swamp.

"Rolled him!" chortled the square, black-haired gent in flaming yellow shirt and Sam Brown belt. "You say it was just a young—?"

"Sure. Not over seventeen," giggled the little moon-faced man in khaki. "You shoulda saw it, Lou."

"Shoulda seen it, dope! Mind your gram!"

"Huh? Yeh . . . You shoulda seen it. I was just comin' 'round that last clump o' trees an' I saw . . . seen . . . the kid choppin' this stiff's legs free. 'Mike,' I says, 'here's a crime bein' committed, sure as you're a Big Shot. But before I could draw a bead on him, th' kid dragged thisun outta th' muck, yanked off his pack, grabbed his gun and hightailed it into the brush, draggin' th' stuff after him 'cause he wasn't strong enough to carry it all."

"Yeh?" Yellow Shirt bellowed with laughter. "Think you'd rec?"

"Sure." (Mike apparently was quite accustomed to his friend's habit of amputating the ends of sentences.) "He was half-starved. Had red hair. I can find him in no time at the Digin's."

"Think we ought to search the bod?"

"Nah. Th' kid cleaned him right down to th' hide. Let th' scamours have him."

"Oke, then. Let's trav."

Obediently the little man followed

the big one out of Frank's field of vision.

When the sound of their footsteps had died away the "dead" man sat up groggily and studied the situation. So the girl . . . he had never asked her name . . . had double crossed him in spite of her promises. He should have expected it. A half wild thing, brought up to think that theft, murder and the like were virtues, would be unlikely to change its moral code in a few hours.

She undoubtedly had rifled his pockets too. He felt in one of them and was startled to find his cigarette case. He succeeded in lighting a damp cylinder, then continued his inventory. A second later he yelped with relief as he discovered Tom Grigg's money belt still firmly hugging his middle. Five thousand gold dollars, worn smooth with age though they were, would buy him a new outfit—keep him a little longer from the Concentration Camp which yawned for him.

Glumly he staggered to his feet and set off through the gloom, following the footprints which the girl had left on the grey sand. As he abandoned the rush-grown strip which surrounded the swamp and started into the sparsely-wooded upland in the direction where he thought the Diggin's must lie, a flicker of white attracted his attention. Against a bush, with a strip of his borrowed shirt around the muzzle, leaned his Tommy gun. Beside it was the bandoleer of shells.

An unreasoning wave of hope . . . and perhaps something more . . . swept over the greenhorn.

"Hey, kid," he shouted.

Not even a sodden echo answered.

For some time he cast back and forth along the dune, searching for his pack without success. Finally he shrugged and walked on, mouth corners turned down bitterly. Obviously

the girl had left his gun only because it was too heavy to carry.

THE eternal semi-twilight was deepening into wet black velvet when Frank finally reached the Diggin's. Attracted by a patch of misty light and then by snatches of phonograph music, he squished through the ankle-deep gumbo of a deserted Main Street until an extra-loud burst of noise caused him to turn in at what was plainly the town's best saloon.

The double screen doors, designed to bar the planet's bug population, opened automatically and snapped shut behind him like rickety jaws.

"Check your gun," growled a cauliflowered individual inside. "No rods allowed."

Regretfully, Frank handed over his weapon, accepted a numbered check in return and paused to survey the layout.

It looked much like the "set" of a Wild West telie. A mahogany bar, backed by a blotched, fly-specked mirror, ran across one side of the room. In a corner, where the band should have been, a juke box blared the dance tune which had been most popular on Earth a year before. Men, dressed in worn overalls, lounged over the bar, watched the few careful players at the faro and roulette tables or made bored love to scantily-clad and hungry-looking hostesses. At tables along the walls others were playing penny ante and pretending they liked it.

Yet this was no telie scene. Besides the shabbiness and lack of verve there was another difference, something subtle which Frank strove to define as he leaned against the door frame.

"Looking for someone, handsome, or will I do?" crooned a blonde in the barrest excuse for a scarlet sarong.

"You'll do," he answered warily. "How about a drink?"

"Sure." She positively glowed. "Scotch for mine."

"Scotch? But . . ."

"I know it's two bucks a shot." The smile faded. "But you're no piker are you, honey? The local stuff is lousy."

"You have Scotch. I'll take the local stuff. Can't cut into my grub-stake," said Frank to make conversation, then checked himself as he realized he had probably made too much.

"Oh, in that case, honey," beamed the girl . . . he noticed there was a dark streak along the part in her hair . . . "I'll string along too. (Waiter! Two Gurga Collins.) I always try to give you miners a break even if it is against the law."

The liquor wasn't bad, although it tasted faintly of swamp water. And it quickly pervaded his empty stomach with a rosy glow. As they sipped it, the hostess rubbed her naked shoulder against his invitingly, but seemed at a loss for conversation. Her silence reminded him that the whole crowd was strangely quiet. There was no hum of banter or argument . . . only calls for drinks and cards and the intermittent humming click of roulette wheels.

"Things seem kind of dead around here," he ventured.

"They always do." Shrug. "It's the hard times . . . and the mikes."

"Mikes?"

"Yeh. Microphones. Under each table." Her voice dropped. "They put 'em in at every new diggin's to size up the mob. Here. I'll show you." Her limp fingers sought his and guided them to a perforated lump embedded in the wood. "Get the idea?"

"Couldn't we take a walk?" Frank wanted to follow his lead.

"The jitbugs would eat us alive at this hour. Wait, though. How about coming to my room? I know how to disconnect the mike there so we can

talk." She saw him hesitate and essayed a blush. "Of course, if you don't want . . ."

"Why not?" Frank downed the rest of his drink hurriedly. "Lead the way, Miss . . ."

"Smith," she supplied as she rose sinuously. "Joan Smith. (Waiter! Send a pitcher of the same up to my room.) Come along, honey."

AS THEY turned toward the narrow stairway, the screen doors slapped open and shut to reveal a youth in mosquito hat, khaki shirt and trousers several sizes too large, who stood just inside the entrance, cradling a rifle in the crook of one arm.

"Check your rod, pard," croaked the cloakroom attendant. "Check your . . ."

"Check nothing!" snarled the newcomer. "That mug by the stairs is making passes at my dame!" The rifle exploded.

Frank heard the bullet zip past his ear to smash into the maze of fluorescent lights which hung over the bar.

In the following semi-darkness the dazed tenderfoot had a kaleidoscopic impression of the blonde's clinging arms, the spatter of glass fragments, the barkeep yelling "Turn out the guard!" into a microphone, the thump of overturned tables as the guests came to life and flung themselves on the floor, and the screams of hostesses.

The gun spoke again and again. Each time another bank of lights blinked out. Then, as the room went completely dark, the screens gnashed their teeth again above the bedlam.

Jerking loose from the covering shadow beside him, Frank sprang for the door. Nobody was going to take potshots at him like that! He made a grab for his gun as he passed the rack, managed to yank it free and went

through the doors before they could open.

"Hey, you!" he yelled. "Stop and fight like a man!"

He had to stop, himself, at that point to disentangle the wire mesh he had ripped away in his plunge. Instantly his head was surrounded by a cloud of ravening insects, almost as big as bats and reminiscent of those flitting monsters once drawn by Dr. Seuss.

Half-blinded, he flailed about in agony until a familiar voice said:

"Here. Smear some of this goo on. It'll keep them away till we reach cover."

"You!" he gasped, recognizing his fiendish little friend at last, despite her disguise in his spare clothing.

"Who else," she grunted, hitching up her baggy pants.

"But why'd you shoot at me?" He smeared vigorously.

"To keep you from making a damn fool of yourself." She grabbed his arm and dragged him along the mirey street as they heard the rapid tramp of a guard detail approaching at the double. "That dame's one of The Shirt's best pumpers. Recognized her soon as I went in."

"Pumpers? The Shirts?"

"Yeh. The boss's spies to you, greenhorn. She'd have pumped you dry in half an hour, slipped you a Mickey Finn and got a cut on your money belt after you'd been concentrated."

"I'm not that green!"

"Maybe not." Her words carried no conviction.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To a hangout across the tracks. We gotta hurry. They'll be turning the whole town out after us."

THEY had reached dryer ground by this time and the girl was setting a pace which he found hard to match.

"Halt!" shouted a voice behind them.

They sprinted frantically, dodging to escape the bullets which felt for them in the darkness and the eternal drizzle. Finally the girl jerked Frank into a narrow, fetid alley. They crept along this for ten minutes or so, slipping and sliding on garbage and probable dead cats until another challenge rang out.

"Who goes?"

"Friends of Sadie's," panted the girl. "Emergency!"

"Pass."

A dim yellow oblong opened before them and they burst into the empty office of some warehouse.

"What's up?" asked the disembodied voice.

"Rescued this greenhorn from a pumper. The Shirt's on our tail."

"Your number?"

"Three-oh-four ST."

A panel slid aside in what seemed to be a solid brick wall.

"Through there," the voice directed. "Bear to your left at every door. They're all unlocked. Good luck."

"Say, what's all this?" Frank found breath to ask when, half an hour later, they stood somewhere on the outskirts of the Diggin's, rubbing their shins, which had come in contact with various packing cases during their flight.

"Several things." He could feel her grin. "First, as long as I can maintain this disguise, we'll be known as deadly enemies by the Big Shots."

"But won't they pick us up tomorrow?"

"Nope. That would be what they call double jeopardy. If you get away in Wildoatia after committing a crime, you can't be picked up later. That goes even for murder. Of course treason's quite a different matter.

"I see," said Frank, who didn't. "Go on."

"Well, my second point is that any friend of Sadie Thompson is a friend of Them, so—"

"Them is spelled with a big 'T', isn't it?" he hazarded.

"I don't go much on spelling and such things. Guess so." She tugged at this arm. "Come on, pard. We can't stand here gassing. I know a shack where we can hole in for the night."

"Say, what's your name . . . pard?" He used the new term with difficulty. "I've always forgot to ask you before."

"Joan—Joan Smith."

"Oh come now." He stopped threading his way among the chunks of dimly phosphorescent rocks which littered their path. "That's was the pumpers' name."

"It was, huh? Want to make something out of it?" Her tone was suddenly grim.

"No, but . . ."

"But in Wildoatia, folks don't ask too many personal questions." She softened and slipped a thin arm through his. "Come on, my wide-eyed boy. We've got to get some sleep, so we can jump good claims in the morning."

AS it turned out, they didn't have to jump their claims. When they went out to the actual diggings at dawn they found that "Discovery" and ten plots above and below it were being guarded with rifles by lynx-eyed, gaunt and ragged claimants. The real flood of prospectors had not yet arrived, however, so they were able to stake adjoining claims on a granite outcropping from the low-lying cliffs. The veins looked skimpy to Frank's unpracticed eye but Joan swore—and that's no figure of speech—that they were better than anything in sight.

"Before I stopped your carousing last night I put in an order for drills

and other equipment" she informed her partner. "They'll be delivered shortly, under separate names, of course. Then about noon we should receive a visit from The Shirt and his shadow. Don't be surprised if I heave a rock at you when they show up. And whatever they do, don't put up an argument. You can't win."

"But—"

"They'll probably requisition your tommy gun. It's a new model and they can't afford to buy them these days. If they take it, however, you're legally entitled to one of their's in exchange. Better bury your money belt, but keep a few hundred bucks in your jeans. They'll beat you half to death if they don't find any cash . . . Wait a minute, though." She bit her thumb thoughtfully. "If they give you a good licking they may be too tired to bother me. . . . Not that I couldn't take it, but it would be a lot . . . pleasanter if they didn't discover I'm a girl."

"I'll hide all the money," he said grimly.

"Thanks' pard. Don't think it's because I'm scared of getting hurt. Why, once in camp they broke my arm, but I wouldn't. . . ."

"Sun's coming up," he interrupted to avoid more horrors. "We'd better get to work before someone sees us talking together." Resolutely turning his back on her, he walked away and started investigating the seam of ore in the center of his claim.

A tractor from the village arrived an hour or so later and he paid a goodly portion of his grubstake for dynamite, cheap drills and other shoddy necessities. Starting work in earnest he then built a moisture-proof shelter for extracted ore completely surrounding the vein and, inside it in the sticky heat, began banging away.

The smash of a rock against the hut,

followed by a stream of billingsgate from the other side of the gulch, brought him outside.

"You filthy blankety-blank and so-and-so," the young harridan on the next claim was screaming. "Stop trying to undercut my seam or I'll fill you full of lead." She was hopping with fury.

"Go bite a scamour, you sorrel-topped sliver," he yelled back. "Your seam hasn't got a seam."

"What's going?" rasped a harsh voice at his elbow. "Don't you incors do anything but squab?" It was the square man in the yellow shirt who had found him at the edge of the jungle.

"I'M SORRY, sir." Frank was on his best behavior. "That squirt on the next claim spends his time thinking up new ways to annoy me. If I didn't know you needed ore so badly, I'd drill him."

"What you mean, we need?" The Shirt took his remark as a personal insult.

"Why, uh," Frank fumbled. "I just thought. . . ."

"Incors don't. . . . Paid your summer relief yet?" For once the Big Shot finished a sentence.

"Summer relief?"

"Yeh. Two hundred fifty bucks. Hand it ove!"

"But I haven't got that much. Spent almost all my grubstake for equipment this morning."

"Liar!" A hamlike first connected with his jaw. Frank flew through the air, hit the side of the hut with sickening force and collapsed on a heap of rock. His hand started for his holster, then relaxed. For Joan's sake he'd have to take his beating.

"All right now, deliv!" snarled his tormentor.

"I told you," the other blurted through bleeding lips. "I—"

The Shirt jerked him to his feet, back him against the hut and hammered him unmercifully until his senses reeled and he crumpled to the ground again, half conscious.

"Say, Lou," giggled a second well-remembered voice. "You sure can cut 'em to ribbons when you want to. Ain't you gonna kick him?"

The Shirt took the hint and Frank felt a rib crack.

"Say, Lou." The giggle seemed to come from miles away now. "Don't he look kinda familiar layin' there?"

"Mike, how many times have I got to? It's 'lying', not 'layin'."

"Sorry, boss." Mike, his feelings hurt, slouched away to explore the hut. But almost immediately he sang out cheerfully. "Say, Lou. Come lookit this tommy gun. It's a lulu."

Frank wriggled over until his ear was against the wall and listened to them "inspecting" his effects and picking the things which pleased them. Soon both reappeared with sizeable bundles in their arms.

"You've got to leave me a gun of some kind," their victim managed to gasp.

He got another kick for his pains, together with a muttered order which caused Mike to lean his own repeater against the door.

"Gonna take the red-head over there next?" the little fellow then hinted sardonically.

"My knuckles hurt," Lou replied. "How about you?"

"Uh uh!" Mike quailed. "I'd rather watch."

"You're a soft. A regular cryb!"

"I'll inspect the redhead tomorrow. Honest I will, boss." The little fellow was almost in tears. "Today we gotta date with the governor for lunch, remember? We gotta get back and wash up."

"Oke. Catch." Lou tossed his bundle to his helper and the two marched briskly away.

"FRANK — Did they hurt you much?" Joan's tearstained face appeared around the corner of the hut a few minutes later.

"Enough," he groaned, managing to sit up. "That big dockwalloper! I'll . . ."

"No you won't." She was bathing his bruised face now. "There's lots worse Big Shots than The Shirt. Knock him off and we'll get a real fanatic out here who'll skin us all."

"But—"

"Don't worry. Just get the pay dirt out. If I know Mike he'll forget all about inspecting me tomorrow. There. How do you feel now?"

"Fine," he lied as he struggled to his feet. "Thanks, Simon Legree. I'll get back to the mines."

"Uh *huh!*" sniggered a voice. "Partners! And a skirt too, just like I thought." They whirled to find Mike, arms akimbo and short legs spread, surveying them in triumph.

"Just *as* you thought!" Frank's retort was automatic. He could have bitten his tongue off for it, but relaxed as he saw The Shirt's aide wilt before the familiar attack.

"Yeh," he flinched. "Just as I thought! But your play-acting on the beach and in the saloon didn't fool me a minute. Will you come along quiet or do I call the guard?"

"Aw, gee, Mr. Mike." Joan shocked her partner by starting to whimper like a frightened child. "Don't concentrate us just when we've got a chance to make a real strike."

"Whaddayuh mean, a real strike?" Mike giggled again. "We inspected this outcrop. Ain't enough ore here to fill a tooth."

"That's what you think," Joan answered darkly. "What'd you say if I told you—" She clapped hands over her mouth.

"Told me what?" Mike's pig eyes were gleaming.

"What's The Shirt having lunch with the governor for?" was the startling reply.

"None of your damned business." Mike was no longer smiling.

"Ain't it? Why everyone in the Digin's knows his nibs is here to tell your boss that production of U-235 must be stepped up or there'll be a purge."

"Gee!" Mike was flabbergasted now.

"Yeh." Joan strode toward him beligerently. "The new strike's a flop, aint it? And things are getting tougher and tougher at Venusport, ain't they? And even the incors are grumbling and starting to organize, so that the camps are full up and overflowing. And—"

"Stop it, you hell cat!" yelled Mike. "It's a lie."

Joan changed her tack again.

"Look," she said softly. "You Big Shots are in a jam. I suppose I should laugh, 'cept I've always wanted to be a Big Shot myself. But maybe we can make a deal. You forget about Frank and me breaking the law, give us a break to make our pile and I'll show you where there's enough 235 to set Venus spinning backward. Well?"

"You'll show me what?"

"I'll show you—the Mother Lode." Jean's voice was flat.

"The Mother Lode!" Mike roared with laughter. "Tell me another!"

For answer, she ran across the gulch, ducked into her hut and reappeared a moment later carrying a little leaden box.

"Look at these!" she cried triumphantly.

MIKE'S jaw dropped and his eyes goggled as he pawed at the glowing crystals inside.

"Pure stuff," he gabbled. "Pure isotope."

"How much are they worth?"

"Eighty grand — a hundred grand, maybe." He licked his lips. "Where'd you find them?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"It's my duty to report this to the—"

"And it's Frank's duty to drill you right through the head if you take a step."

"You can't do this to me. Lou will . . ."

"Forget about Lou, you worm." She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "With the stuff I'm going to show you, you'll be boss of all Wildoatia."

"Me? Boss?" Mike shuddered. "Aw, no, I—" His narrow shoulders straightened. "Say, maybe you're right." He tried to glare. "Well, where is it?"

"Not so fast. We want safe conducts and a big enough cut to make us Big Shots too."

"You do, huh? There's ways of making you talk."

"Sure! You lay a finger on either of us and I'll talk so loud the whole Diggin's will hear. Then where'll *you* be?"

"You got me, pard," Mike grinned uneasily after a long time out for thought. "What you want me to do?"

"Go back to town. Don't say a word about this to The Shirt or the governor. Just say you inspected me and found everything o.k. Then tonight you get safe conducts for us and draw up an agreement on our cut. Come back here around noon tomorrow, making sure you're not followed, and I'll show you where the Mother Lode is."

"Then this ain't it?"

"Of course not. This is a blind. The

lode's—well, I'll show you where it is when I get those papers, not before. Now beat it, big boy." She gave him one of her most disarming smiles. "I think we'll get along all right."

"You let him go!" marveled Frank as the little man hurried out of earshot. "How do you know—?"

"I know a lot of things," his partner snapped. "I know, for instance, that The Shirt will see right through Mike. When he comes back here tomorrow he'll be shadowed by forty pumpers."

"Then—?"

"Then somebody not far from here is going to have a heart-to-heart talk with the governor tonight."

"Say, am I going crazy?"

"Everybody's crazy in Wildoatia. Why not you—? Here take a radiogram." She hugged herself with delight at his bewilderment. "'Chancellor Ebert, Venusport: Mother Lode located at Dead Man's Delta. Local officials planning doublecross you and jump same around noon. To locate lode, trail party of three leaving Diggin's that hour. (SIGNED) A friend.' How's that? Your job's to have it sent early tomorrow. The grapevine will have it all over the place in an hour."

"I begin to see what you're up to," Frank muttered, "but what happens to us when they all pile in here and discover there isn't any Mother Lode?"

"My friend—" She hitched up her pants, folded her arms with the aplomb of a Napoleon and let him have it. "I wasn't kidding. The Mother Lode is right up in these hills, not five miles from where you're standing. You saw the crystals, didn't you?"

BUT you didn't mine them. You didn't have time." He held his aching head in his hands. "I don't get

it. If you've been here before and mined the Lode, why in heaven's name did you tell the Big Shots about it?"

"Little boy," she crooned. "Since you're so smart, tell me how long we could work such a bonanza without being spotted and highjacked or murdered. If, by some miracle, we weren't caught at the start, how could we avoid arousing suspicion when we tried to buy enough chemicals and equipment to refine that much metal. And if—"

"You win," he groaned. "Although I'd let the stuff stay in the ground forever before I'd turn it over to those, those—"

Never mind your cusswords. After all, you think I'm a lady. Just follow my lead and you'll see one of the biggest exhibitions of fireworks in the history of this planet. Couldn't happen anywhere else, but on Venus, where the Double Cross is the planetary emblem, it may work—yes," she shook her curly head dubiously, "it just might work."

"All right—boss." Frank surrendered.

There was no sleep for either of the conspirators that rainy, windswept night. As soon as darkness fell Joan borrowed \$500 from her partner, swathed herself in jitbug netting and departed on her visit to the governor. She slipped back about midnight, face and arms scratched and bruised as though she had done some second story work, jubilant as a refrigerator salesman who had just put over a big deal with the Eskimos—and as communicative as a clam.

Shortly thereafter Frank headed for the Diggin's. He got a sour look from the dozing radio operator as he presented his message, a startled gasp as the fellow read it, and a distinct feeling that his life wasn't worth two cents as he departed and dodged back and forth through the winding streets and stink-

ing alleys to outwit possible followers.

HE DUCKED into his hut just before the hazy daybreak and soon made a great fuss about cooking breakfast and starting work on his claim. As the hours passed he stopped his digging from time to time under the impression that he heard planes passing over. But on each occasion the ship—if there was one—flew so high that it was invisible in the mist.

Another soupy drizzle was blanketing the valley when Mike arrived. He slid down the cliff to land almost at Frank's feet in the midst of a miniature avalanche. It was evident the little man had had no sleep either. In fact he was positively jumpy and breathed a loud sigh of relief when none of the adjoining prospectors noticed his precipitate descent.

"When do we start?" he gulped, glancing nervously over his shoulder.

"Plenty of time," smiled Joan as she came across the gulch, cocked rifle cradled under one arm. "Nobody knows a thing about this."

"I'm not so sure." Mike shook a doleful head. "Lou's mighty smart. He's been watching me kinda funny all morning."

"Bunk. You're lots smarter than he is. Come on, though. We go up the gulch first."

"What about those safe conducts?" ventured Frank.

"You get them only when I see the Mother Lode." Mike was trying his best to be tough. "And you've both got to leave your guns behind. I don't trust you."

"That goes double." Joan wasn't trying. "So you're planning to bump us off, are you? Uh uh!"

"Let's compromise, then." The little Big Shot was in a spot. "You take your gun. I take mine. But your part-

ner leaves his. That's fair, ain't it?"

"It is if you don't walk behind me."

Three abreast, with Frank in the middle, they started up the gulch. At first they watched each other like hawks, but soon were so busy dodging boulders, trying to keep their footing in the muddy little stream which poured down the hills and cursing the low visibility which made the yellow trees assume the shapes of crouching animals that they forgot everything else.

An hour of this and they emerged on a plateau overlooking the river. The sticky heat was a little less oppressive here and the mist thinned until they could see for all of a hundred feet.

"I think somebody's followin' us," Mike panted as they stopped for a rest. "I kinda feel like people was lookin' at me."

"Boloney," chuckled the girl. "We waded the stream most of the way and walked on bare rock the rest. Nobody could follow that trail."

"What if somebody spotted us from the air with an infra-red beam?"

"Have you seen any planes?"

"Naw, but let's get goin'. We've rested enough. . . . Yeow! Look behind you!"

ABOVE the ledge on which they were sitting, a dead grey, swaying head was rising, inch by inch. Its colorless eyes, big as saucers, surveyed them hungrily. Its gash of a mouth slavered in anticipation.

"Gobble, gobble, gobble?" it inquired.

Joan shot from the hip. The head disappeared and there was a great thrashing about in the underbrush.

"Just a scamour," she grunted. "That's who was looking."

"You shouldn't have fired." Mike was brave, now that the danger had

passed. "Gave our position dead away."

"Pooh. Nobody ever comes here."

They hiked for another hour among the sawtoothed hills, Joan moving as confidently as though she had been there before, had memorized the route from a map, or, so it crossed Frank's mind, was faking the whole thing like a brilliant actress. At last she stopped and pointed dramatically to a tangled curtain of vines and orchids which draped across a cliff face directly ahead.

"There it is, Mr. Mike," she said. "Look behind that tangle and you'll find the wealth of the Indies."

"There's probably more scamours in there," Mike hesitated. "You show the path."

With a groan of disgust she pushed forward, apparently forgetting the Big Shot's gun. Frank brought up the rear, thankful that he still had an automatic in his shoulder holster.

Under the green "waterfall" the heat and humidity were almost overpowering. But the girl unearthed a flashlight from her baggy pants and led the way until, in the center of the cliff face, they beheld the telltale oily black seam flecked with yellow spots. It glowed phosphorescently under the flash ray, all of ten feet high and three thick.

At the sight the little man let out a wild yell of triumph. Forgetting all else, he flung himself at the vein, kissing it, trying to hug it in an ecstasy of avarice. Frank wondered if his hard-boiled partner would seize this opportunity. Instead she merely tapped Mike on the arm.

"Our safe conducts now, pal," she snapped.

"What? Oh, sure." The other blinked like a man aroused from deep sleep, then handed over the papers. "Thanks," he mumbled. "I don't know why you're doin' this for me, but I sure appreciates it, an' . . ."

"You surely appreciate it," she corrected him.

"Oh, yeh, sure." As his eyes strayed back to the vein, Joan gripped Frank's arm and whispered, "Come on. Let's get out of here while the going's still good."

They fought their way directly through the matted vines and broke into the open to behold a strange scene. Misty human figures crouched like beasts of prey, were creeping toward them across the little valley from all directions.

"Through here and climb." The girl jerked her friend into a chimney-like crevice in the cliff. "Hell's going to pop."

AT HER words a rifle cracked somewhere to their left. Splinters of stone showered around them. Other guns replied as they began working their way frantically upward. A tommy started puttering not far away. Somewhere, someone turned on an infra red and the battle became general in its lurid, penetrating beams.

Reaching the top of the cliff, Joan threw herself on the ground, panting, and looked below.

"Ever hear of the gingham dog and the calico cat?" she inquired nonchalantly. "If we're lucky there won't even be any sawdust left in a few hours."

"Nor any meddling incors" snarled a harsh voice. They twisted around to find the square man in the yellow shirt covering them with Frank's old gun. "Thought I smelled a rat when those planes began piling in this morn." Lou stalked toward them. "You've got to get up awfully early to catch me off-scent."

Quick as a cat, Joan rolled over and over toward him. Caught off-guard despite his boast, their enemy stumbled

against her hurtling body, recovered and clamped down on the trigger of the tommy just as Frank made a flying tackle. The shots went wild.

But The Shirt was by no means through. He kicked himself free just as Joan rose and flew at him, scratching and kicking in the places which hurt worst. Then Frank returned to the attack, both fists flying. Lou staggered under the onslaught, struck his heel on a boulder, and slipped backward over the edge of the cliff, gun still clutched in his hand.

Joan screamed, rushed to the edge, looked over and dodged back before a gush of machine gun bullets and profanity.

"He's straddling a bush about ten feet down," she gasped. We don't dare lean over or he'll drill us, but I'll hit him on the head with a rock if he climbs back."

Suddenly, however, the swearing ceased and a note of sick terror crept into the voice of The Shirt.

"Help," he yelled. "I can't . . ."

Frank peered cautiously over the edge and gasped. Their foe had dropped his gun and was clinging desperately to the bush with both hands. And, in turn, the plant-animal thing he held was twisting and squirming as it endeavored to withdraw into its hole in the cliff.

"Quick. Quick!" Lou's spine was proving as yellow as his shirt as he fought to hold on and at the same time find some foothold in the steeply sloping precipice. "Throw me a rope. Anything! I'll pay well. I'll make you rich—Big Shots. I can't die."

Joan merely shrugged at this raving. But Frank, unable to bear the stark fear in that harsh voice, ripped off his belt, threw himself flat and dangled it as far over as he could.

Lou released the bush with one hand, made a grab for the heavy buckle—and

missed.

"Closer!" he yelled. "Closer, you stupid id—"

The shrub chose that instant to make another bid for freedom.

And The Shirt fell, turning slowly and screaming, for what seemed an hour before his body disappeared in the mists.

"**S**AVED me shooting him when you pulled him up," grunted Joan.

"You're a hardboiled huzzy!" Frank was struggling to get that dreadful, twisted face out of his mind.

"Have to be if I stay alive in Wild-oatia," she grinned ruefully. "Sorry, Sir Gallahad. You must think I'm pretty awful." With a start he saw that there were tears in her eyes.

"I don't really, Joan." He took her rough little hand. "You're really swell. It's just that this place gives me the jim willies. . . . What do we do next?"

"Get back to the ship." Her fingers curled around his warmly.

"Without benefit of sunshine?"

"Uh huh. If we follow the top of this ridge about six miles we'll be looking right down on the place where we left it."

"Then what?"

"Ever do any parachuting?" She asked this over one shoulder as she hurried off.

"Sure. During my military training. And I've bailed out several times since."

"Good. I bought two chutes last night and cached them at the top of the cliff. It'll take some tall slipping to land on the hatch or in the burned area around it. Think you can do it?"

"I'll try."

"Good boy. . . . For that you can hold my hand again if you like."

And so they left behind and beneath them the sounds of the battle for the Mother Lode and hiked rapidly south-

ward. When they reached their destination and Frank looked over still another beetling cliff at the black dot in the swamp which marked the resting place of his stolen patrol, he almost regretted his promise. The feat which Joan proposed would have been impossible on Earth, but on Venus with its lesser gravitation and heavier atmosphere, it was barely possible.

Grimly he slipped into the pack which she unearthed, but she stopped him before he could jump.

"I'll go first." Her voice trembled only slightly. "I've done more of this sort of thing than you. I'm pretty sure I can make the hatch. Then, if you miss, I'll be down there to use a gun on scamours—and things. Frank . . ."

"Yes?" He could see she was scared.

"If neither of us make it, I just want to tell you that for reasons you don't know, it was necessary to try, anyhow."

"I think I understand, a little."

"And Frank." She caught his lapels with her two hands and this time he didn't try to fend her off. "Since this may be my last chance, I want to tell you that—that I'll team up with you forever, if we make it—and you want to."

Suddenly she was in his arms and he was covering her funny, freckled face with kisses.

SHE broke away after a while, gave him one more lopsided grin, then turned and leaped far out, pulling the rip cord as she did so.

The chute expanded like a white blossom and drifted slowly downward under her slight weight. Once it swung her toward the cliff. She was ready and fended herself off with her feet. Again it started drifting downwind, but she caught the cords and slipped it back into position.

Down, down she went . . . a hundred

feet . . . two hundred feet . . . with the chute growing smaller until it reminded Frank of The Shirt's white face as he fell. A puff of vapor hid her from sight and Frank's heart almost stopped. Then the air cleared and she was there once more. After an interminable time she landed square on the hatch and was fighting to maintain her balance and spill the air out of the tumbling silken folds before she could be jerked head over heels into the hungry swamp.

Frank said a prayer and followed.

He brought up with a sickening jerk as the chute opened late after he had fallen for half the distance, banged himself painfully against the cliff face, lost sight of the hatch as he spun dizzily, discovered it again far to the right, yanked frantically at a handful of cords, managed to spill much too much air, plummeted downward, recovered blindly, grabbed some more cords . . . and splashed sickeningly into the ooze a full thirty feet from the ship.

"Don't move. Don't move!" screamed the girl as he struggled to disentangle himself. "Wait. I'll throw you a rope."

Frank forced himself to relax despite the mounting hysteria that gripped him as he sank to his shoulders in the sucking mud. Then, he discovered to his amazement, he stopped sinking. After a dazed moment he realized that his weight was just balancing the displaced earth and water.

And now, at the edge of the burned area, a row of slimy, snaggle-toothed heads lifted, surveyed him owlishly, then started forward to investigate. Frank held his breath and tried not to bat an eyelash.

"Here's the rope," screamed Joan as she reappeared on the hatch. A coil slapped down beside him. He snatched at it and felt himself being yanked out of the ooze and dragged slowly toward

the ship like a fish on a hook.

"Gobble!" barked the scammers and started after him in earnest, black paws splashing like canoe paddles. The nearest fastened on the seat of his trousers. The cloth ripped. The next instant he was scrambling up and hull of the ship and turning to beat off the ravening crew with some club which Joan thrust into his hands.

"SORRY I'm wearing your only other pair of pants," she twinkled at him when they were safe inside. "Perhaps a towel and a safety pin. . . ."

Frank didn't think it was funny.

"What do you want me to do now, you shameless baggage?"

"Get back to the lode."

He pushed the necessary buttons. Hell broke loose beneath them as the rockets let go. The patrol staggered, groaned, then shot from her mucky bed like a cork out of a champagne bottle.

They circled the mist-filled alley of the lode close enough to see by means of the infra-red that the Big Shots were still engaged in a bloody free-for-all.

"Give her the gun!" Joan commanded when they had wheeled back again and were hovering over the center of the fray and not a hundred feet above it.

Disregarding the fact that a number of those below had now discovered their presence and were firing on the ship, Frank pushed a lever marked

FREE FALL ACCELERATOR

WARNING

NOT TO BE USED IN ATMOSPHERE

A plume of snarling atomic heat burst from the under rockets, struck the ground and spread over it like the flame from a blowtorch.

Before Frank could drag himself off the floor and force his leaden hands to reverse the switch, the patrol was

twenty-five miles high and the outside wall of the control room was glowing cherry red from friction with the air.

"Whew!" Joan was gasping in the sudden heat and endeavoring to stanch the blood from a nasty cut in her forehead. "Ask the man who owns one!"

They drifted down again till the valley was directly beneath the view port. It was now a black expanse with here and there little tongues of flame licking at the scorched vegetation.

"Poor Mike," sighed the girl. "I sort of liked the runt."

"Now what?" Her companion was striving not to be sick.

"One more job. Drive her over to that landslide in the river just above the Diggin's."

"But the rockets won't affect that. And besides . . . the prospectors . . . you wouldn't. . . ."

"Don't worry, pard. It'll be all right—I hope."

WHEN they were idling over the tumbled slide which had put a big kink in the river above the village, Joan instructed him to unscrew the viewport. Then she rummaged in her pockets and brought out the little leaden box which he had seen the day previously. She punched several holes in the top, leaned down and dropped the container into the roaring yellow waters beneath.

"Step on that accelerator again, brother," she cried, "and don't spare the horses."

This time Frank took the precaution to flatten himself on the floor before the rockets took hold. So, through popping eyes, he was able to see what followed.

First the waters boiled under the impact of the ship's blast. Then the U-235 in Joan's box detonated with atom-destroying force just after it hit the surface of the river. And finally the whole

visible surface of Venus disappeared in one vast sheet of flame. Luckily they were going up so fast they outran the force of an explosion which must have rivaled that of a young earthquake.

"Goodbye the Diggin's and my one hundred thousand dollars," said Joan shakily when the game little ship had returned to normal once more. "And goodbye the airfield when the flood hits it in about ten minutes. If any of the Big Shots escaped our strafing in the valley they won't be able to communicate with Venusport or find a ship to take them home. On the other hand, the incors should have enough warning to get to high ground."

"What do we do next, Napoleon?" Frank was awed.

"Hightail it for Venusport, of course. The government should be thoroughly disorganized by the loss of all its leaders who came tearing up here after the Mother Lode just as I gambled they would. Divide and rule, I calls it. When your friends can't get together, then split up your enemies. Whoops!" She executed a few dance steps in the crowded cabin, then sank into a chair, completely exhausted.

"Are They planning to take over?"

"With bells on! I have a hunch the space patrol will help us, if necessary. They've been honing to take a whack at the Big Shots for years, but Washington wouldn't let 'em so long as cheap fuel was coming in regularly. If the patrol comes in with us, that ought to square you . . . for swiping their ship, I mean."

"You said 'us!'" He looked at her thoughtfully. "Are you . . . ?"

"Umm!" She closed her eyes wearily. "Sorta wears a fellow down after a while."

"In that case, why did you potshot me the first time we met?"

"Because I needed a ship like yours

so bad I could taste it. It would have been only a question of days after the horde of prospectors arrived before the Mother Lode would have been traced and re-discovered. If the Big Shots got it in their clutches, goodbye to all Their Hour plans.

"But you might have explained."

"Maybe. But I figured at first you were a maverick patrolman planning to go over to the Big Shots. That *has* happened. Excuse it, pard."

"Pard." He savored the word. "Look," he resumed after he had set the ship's course straight toward Venusport and more trouble, "if we're to team up, oughtn't you tell me your real name. I'm darned sure it's not Joan Smith.

"Well, it's a long story." She slipped a thin hand into his, thought better of it, and cuddled up on his lap. "Once upon a time a little girl was concentrated. And there was a professor chap there who'd specialized in 20th century literature 'fore he came out here—to make his fortune. And he nicknamed the girl Sadie Thompson, like a character in an old book or play or something where it rained all the time and . . ."

"Sadie Thompson!" Frank almost dropped her.

"Yeh. But that still wasn't her real name," she went on drowsily. "Real name's Sadie Griggs. Tom Griggs is my dad."

THE END

The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR
(Continued from page 6)

HAVE you picked up a copy of the new *Mammoth Detective* (now on the stands)? If you haven't, get down there and buy a copy before you miss a mighty swell issue. Among its authors are your favorites: Robert Bloch; Howard Browne (Author of "Warrior Of The Dawn"); and Leroy Yerxa.

UNIVERSAL PICTURES has queried Don Wilcox on the film rights to "The Whispering Gorilla" and Don is quite excited. It seems here's another of our writers who has gone "upstairs." Fortunately, we have a huge supply of his manuscripts on hand,

"SHADOWS At Noon" is the title of a new book which has an element of fantasy in it that might make it interesting to you readers of that type of literature. It details an imaginary air raid on New York, and follows the lives of a selected group of people, and depicts the effect the air raid has on them. The fantastic description of New York during a great raid will thrill you. You can get it at all bookstores.

DO you know how many bees there are in a hive? Observation shows that a hive or colony of bees has its maximum population during the time of storing surplus honey. At this time, the hive contains about 50,000 to 75,000 workers; one queen, and a few hundred to a

thousand drones. During the fall and early winter, the colony decreases in number. And when brood-rearing begins in the spring, the colony has become so reduced in population that 10,000 to 15,000 workers constitute a good swarm. Drones are non-existent at this time, for they are all driven out at the end of the summer honeyflow.

In the animal world, parasites are not wanted.

HERE'S another: Did you know that the raccoon washes its food before eating? This is done by holding the food in its forepaws and shaking it in water.

There is a definite reason for such behavior. The coon lives near streams and much of its food consists of frogs, stranded fish, crawfish, and similar creatures captured in shallow water. There is the necessity, then, of rinsing the mud and sand from its aquatic prey. The tendency toward such behavior is so strong that the animal will usually go through the motions of washing its food even when no water is accessible!

No wonder the Germans call the raccoon *Waschbaer*, which means *wash bear*.

ANOTHER scientific bit: The Great Salt Lake in Utah, it seems, is not a favored piscine haven. According to the United States Bureau of Fisheries, no fish can live in the lake. With the exception of the larvae of certain flies, the only living thing found in the lake is a small brine shrimp.

AND another item: In perfect storage for centuries! That is the description of the edible animal flesh found in the frozen region of Siberia. The animal bodies found were those of mammoths

and the wooly rhinoceros. In spite of the fact that these animals have been dead since the Ice Age, scientists say, one can still eat their flesh. "Eat," but what about "enjoy?" After you!

ALL of us have heard of harmful bacteria. We know that many diseases and epidemics are caused by these minute creatures. For this reason most people think of the word, bacteria, as being synonymous with trouble or harm. As a matter of fact, only a very small proportion of the known bacteria are disease-causing bacteria. The vast majority are helpful and some are vital.

Bacteria find much use in industry; many of the commercial preparations of the chemical industry would be impossible in the absence of bacteria; the source of many basic compounds, especially in the making of plastics, is in the products of the helpful bacteria.

In the wine and beer industry, any harm to the bacteria would be dangerous, and any change in their properties would be a death blow to production. Fermentation of the raw product is a necessary step; and as the great Pasteur discovered, it is the bacteria alone which are responsible. These industries, as well as many others, hire research bacteriologists to care for and improve the bacteria and their products.

The same holds true for the cheese industry and the bakery industry. Without the aid of these minute, microscopic animals, neither of these industries would exist. Yeasts, closely related to bacteria, enable our mothers and bakers to supply us with our daily bread. In the large cheese industry, much improvement and variation has been accomplished because of the fact that changes have been made in kind and quantity of bacteria used in the preparations.

Perhaps the most important function of the bacteria is in changing the waste products of living things into something which they can use again. Without such a constant source of renewed materials, life, not only of man, but all life, would soon cease to exist on earth. These amazing creatures take the carbon dioxide which we return to the air and convert it into usable oxygen. The same holds for nitrogen, the basic element for body-building material called protein.

AFTER reading all the remarkable scientific findings in these columns, it may seem surprising—almost unbelievable—to tell you that, here in the United States, a common everyday occurrence goes scientifically unexplained.

According to the Department of Interior, the 47 hot springs at Arkansas Hot Springs National Park are still puzzling to research men—the "exact mechanism of the springs is still a mystery."

Of course, where definite information is lacking, theory exists. And several explanations have been advanced for the daily million-gallon flow at temperatures averaging 140 degrees. The most favored of these is the meteoric theory.

"This theory supposes," states a bulletin recently issued by the Department, "that rain water which sinks in the valley floor between Sugar Loaf and West Mountain of the Ouachita range is heated on its underground path by passing close to a mass of hot rock before it gushes out."

Park geologists explain another theory. This is that the hot springs water has never before been at the surface of the earth, but comes from heated rocks at the earth's interior, where it escapes when molten rock cools and hardens.

Other theories, considered less likely than the above, are that the water may be heated by chemical reactions, by friction of subterranean rock masses in motion, by the heat of compression from the overlying rock, or by radioactive minerals.

MANY people believe that birds hatch their eggs because of some maternal instinct in them. According to Dr. Johann A. Loeser, the reason birds hatch their eggs is because of a simple sensation in the skin caused by "hatching-spots." These spots appear just previous to the time for hatching and are believed to be caused by hormones. These spots usually occur in one parent, usually the male, and this parent performs the sitting process during hatching.

These hatching spots are like an inflammation on the bird and the heat helps the eggs to hatch. The eggs, on the other hand, are nice and cool and the parent enjoys this coolness on the inflammation. Thus when the weather is very hot and the eggs are warmed and do not cool the birds, they will often forsake the eggs. Some birds such as the Egyptian plover or the African ostrich only sit on their eggs during the cooler hours of the night when the eggs can give them relief in their hatching spots.

To further prove that there is no maternal instinct involved, experiments have been performed in which the eggs have been replaced with glass eggs or stones and the parent will sit on them just as if they were its own eggs. The "eggs" will even be turned over at intervals so that the bird can exchange the warmed top surface for the bottom cooler surface.

Moreover, the birds will sit on the eggs only as long as the hatching spots last. To prove this, eggs were substituted for the bird's eggs just prior to their being hatched. The hatching spots on the bird disappeared just about the time when the original eggs should have hatched. The bird, thereupon, abandoned the eggs regardless of the fact that they had not yet hatched.

But just as soon as the eggs hatch the situation is changed. The hatching of the eggs was done for purely selfish reasons on the part of the parent. But the parents care for their young brood because of a feeling of responsibility for the helpless living creatures. The change from inanimate objects to a living brood makes all the difference in the world to the parental attitude of the birds.

Rap.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

BY BERKELEY LIVINGSTON

When the city editor sent Lou P. Geroux out for items of local color, neither had any idea that it would be all one hue—blood red!

THE editor tilted his chair back, adjusted his glasses more firmly on his nose and said:

"Geroux, I want a story on some particularly section of Chicago's Loop. Give it a little life; make it colorful. Understand?"

Lou P. Geroux shifted the three chips, each representing a dollar, which he had won playing '26' at Casey's Castle, from his right to his left hand.

"Sure thing, boss," he said agreeably. Any particular part of the Loop you'd like to have me cover?"

The editor snorted loudly, and said:

"I don't give a damn where you go! So long as you stay out of Casey's Castle. Lately, too many of your stories have been inspired by that cheap bar whiskey Casey serves. If I hear that you've been down there bending your elbow over his bar, I'll send you back to covering court news again. The divorce courts! Understand?"

"Sure. I understand, boss. And I know just where I'm going. Right over to Moe's Mansion. Plenty of color there. Well," Lou said, absent-mindedly scratching himself where his pants were shiniest, "have space ready for the story of the year. Lou is off to scoop-the-Loop!"

The door closed with its usual bang behind the lank, ungainly figure of the

reporter. A faint odor, a sweet and sour mingling of beer and whiskey, hovered in the air near the door for a second as though it were an essential part of Lou which had been forgotten in his haste to leave.

The thin nostrils of the editor's large red-veined nose twitched in remembrance; and his hand reached down and pulled a quart bottle from a drawer. He poured a generous shot into a water glass.

The label on the bottle read "Casey's Castle. Best Bar Bourbon."

LOU almost passed the strange-looking flop house, in his hurry to get Moe's. Almost; but something about its dilapidated, run-down appearance, its crumbling red brick face, its look of absolute misery made him stay his steps.

"Hmm," he said slowly, as his eyes wandered up and down the architectural eyesore, "never saw this joint before. Looks old enough to have come in with the first settlers."

He walked over to the dust-grimed glass door. Barely decipherable lettering read: "Rates 50 Cents." He poked a speculative hand at the glass, and the door swung creakingly away from his palm. He entered and found himself before a narrow, gloomy staircase.



The two hooded figures dragged him roughly toward the woman

Up above, at the head of the stairs, was a dim ghostly radiance.

"Well, Lou old boy," the reporter said to himself, "if it's atmosphere you're looking for, this is it."

The stairs creaked and groaned with each step he took. And their protesting sounds seemed to continue, even after he arrived at the register desk at the end of the stair. A single small electric bulb in an old-fashioned fixture cast a weak glow over the run-down lobby. The lobby was deserted. Nor was there anyone behind the desk. A small bell stood invitingly near to Lou's right hand. He accepted the invitation. It made a tinny sound.

Lou's eyes blinked in startled wonder at what came out of a room behind the desk. If it wasn't Father Time, it was certainly a close relative of that gentleman. The only things missing were the hour glass and staff. The beard and night-shirt were there, however.

"Look, old-timer," Lou said apologetically, "I didn't know you were asleep. But I saw the sign on the door. And——"

"Quite all right, young man," said the Methuselah in the night shirt. "Just sign the register. I'll see what I have for you."

His voice was as faded and old as the rest of him.

Lou's fountain pen point made an inky puddle on the yellow-with-age paper of the register.

The old man brought his rheumy eyes down close to the blot.

"Can't make it out," he said after staring at the blot for a few seconds. "What does it say?"

"Lou P. Geroux," Lou told him.

"Ah, yes, of course" the old man said.

Lou had the strangest feeling that he had been expected. The old gray beard closed the register and said:

"Well now, I've just one room left. Just walk down this corridor to the rear. It's the only room there. Good night."

And without a further word, the old man turned and walked back through the door from which he had come.

Lou walked to the rear, muttering:

"What a joint! The desk clerk is a refugee from a ouija board. He doesn't ask for any money. None of the rooms seems to have a key. At least my room doesn't have one. And I walked into this with my eyes open. Well," he concluded, as he faced the heavy oak door which seemed to be the entrance to his room, "you'd better sleep that way. And with all your clothes on, too."

The heavy oaken door closed behind him and he looked, with open-mouthed curiosity, at the room he was in.

His eyes noted the huge brick fireplace, the heavy hand-hewn table on which two tall candlesticks had been placed, the bearskin rugs on the bare wooden floor, even a suit of armor in a corner. The most interesting piece of furniture in the candle-lit room, however, was the four-posted bed in a far corner.

"Holy suffering Republicans," ejaculated Lou, "people haven't used those beds since Plymouth Rock was just another pebble on the beach."

HE WALKED over to it and sat down. The flickering candle flames threw strange distorted shadows against the walls. The room and all its furniture seemed part of a long-gone era. And as he sat there, Lou felt an overpowering desire to go to sleep. He knew he shouldn't. After all, he had only come in to get some local color. His thoughts began to wander.

"Local color. White candles, yellow flames, gray smoke—tha's funny—just

thought that suit of armor moved—must be getting sleepy—think I'll lie down—for few—minutes. . . .

The water was so thick and oily. And that shiny suit of armor was gaining on him. Lou knew he had to escape. If he could only reach the surface, he knew he'd be safe. But it was so far above! Then, just as he felt a steel arm take hold of his ankle, he broke through the surface and was—Awake!

Lou grinned sheepishly to himself. He turned his head and saw that the candles were burning even more brightly than before. As was the fire in the fireplace. He sat up, stretched—then yelped in consternation:

"What the hell went on here while I was asleep!"

He looked down at his strangely clothed body. Strangely clothed was right. He was wearing a pair of doublets and a heavy velvet tunic, tied together with a narrow leather belt. On his feet were a pair of soft buckskin sandals. His bewildered speculations were cut short by sounds which came from behind the heavy oak door of his room. There was a barely audible shouting and now a furious pounding on the door.

"Take it easy, you jerks," Lou said angrily. "The door's open, c'mon in."

Suddenly the door was flung wide and two men came charging in. They came to within a few feet of Lou, and stopped.

Lou looked at them closely and a grin split his wide, humorous mouth. Now he knew what had happened to him. He had walked into the house of some eccentric: evidently a man who liked to play practical jokes. For the two men who confronted him were in the habiliments of the Middle Ages. Long robes covered their bodies. Cows attached to the robes made it difficult to see their faces, but he could see one of them was bearded. The bearded one

was evidently the leader, for he said:

"Aye. It is he whom *she* hath described."

Lou, the grin still on his face, said: "Sure it's me. Who'd you think uh'd be here? Yehudi?"

The grin was wiped off his mouth, however, when the one without the beard advanced and grabbed him in a stranglehold. The character in the beard rushed in to help his friend. Not that Lou had showed any signs of fight. In fact he had twisted his head about to snarl:

"Hey, Muscle; easy with that hustle! I can walk without help!"

The two didn't seem to understand. Without further talk, they rushed him out of the room. They went so fast Lou's feet hit only the high spots in the floor, in transit.

They turned left on coming through the door, went down a series of stone steps so fast, Lou thought they'd taken an elevator; then through another door. The door was an entrance to a room, bare of any furniture, other than a squat, wide, throne-like chair, on which sat one of the most beautiful women, Lou had ever seen.

She was dressed in a flowing garment of some fine material so sheer that she might not have had anything on at all, for all the covering it did. A headdress of the same material covered her blond hair. Both headdress and gown had jewels sewn haphazardly in the material.

A gay yet gentle smile showed tiny white teeth as she looked at the breathless reporter.

"So you've come at last," she said softly.

Lou, still trying to regain his breath, wrenched himself out of the embrace of the beardless character and said:

"Look, tutz, if I'd a known that you wanted to see me, I'd a come a lot

sooner. That is, if the boys here hadn't tried to hold me back."

The gay gentle smile was still on her lips as she said:

"So Mark and Skwirly tried to hold you back?"

LOU'S mouth seemed to stretch from ear to ear, so wide was his grin, as he turned to laugh at the two who had brought him to her. But the grin was wiped from his face at the obvious terror her words seemed to have created in the two. The guy in the beard finally got his voice back from his sandals where it had seemed to have fallen, and bleated:

"Believe him not! We brought him as quickly as could be done."

"Sure they did, beautiful," Lou hastened to assure her. "I was just ribbing a little."

"So you think I am beautiful," she asked, her blue eyes switching to Lou.

"Sure; but tell me, beautiful: What's the gag? Who're you and who are these two characters behind me? If it's what I think it is, you got a swell setup for it."

A small frown appeared on the smooth white skin of her forehead. She said in a puzzled voice:

"I do not quite understand you. But the one in the beard is Mark. And the other is Skwirly——"

"That's what I thought when I saw him," Lou interrupted. "But do go on, Luscious. I'm all ears; just like a loving cup."

"No," she went on, "I do not understand you. But that is as it should be. You come from a different world?"

Her eyes were pensive now as though she wondered what sort of a world he did come from.

Lou, feeling more and more at ease, said:

"Y'know, beautiful, old Crumplepuss

my editor, is sure going to like this story. Beautiful gal rents rundown flop in the Loop, just to satisfy the humor in her. And how she——"

She broke in on his ramblings as though he had interrupted a train of thought.

"Don't you want to know who I am and why you are here?" she said.

He nodded his head.

"I am Lupe Geroux," she announced.

He looked blank for a minute, then grinned and said:

"Well, what d'ya know. I'm Lou P. Geroux, too."

"Yes, I know that," she said.

"You do?"

"Of course, only a Lou P. Geroux could have slept in that room."

Lou looked bewildered at all this.

"Don't you know what *loupe-garou* means?" she asked.

He shook his head dumbly.

"It means werewolf." She smiled as sweetly as though she had said it meant chocolates.

Lou's grin became a little sickly. This dame was not only beautiful but also dizzy. And it wasn't from riding the merry-go-round.

"Look, beautiful," he said, "you oughta lay off the stuff. I hear it makes you lose your hair. It makes you balmy in the belfry too!"

She went on as though she hadn't heard him.

"Yes, although you are not in reality a *loupe-garou*, you are a descendant of one. So the keeper of the records let you sleep here tonight. And soon, very soon, it shall be midnight, the unholy hour. Then I will help you attain your rightful heritage. Does that not please you?"

The sixty-four dollar question remained unanswered as far as Lou was concerned. All he wanted to do was get out of there—but fast.

This dame was carrying a joke too far. Growing wolf's paws at the ends of her wrists. Making her ears long and furry like that. What was she trying to do, scare him? Well, she was!

HE DIDN'T realize he had been backing away from her until he bumped into the trembling body of Skwirly. He heard Mark whisper in his beard, "The hour is at hand. The she-wolf comes forth."

Lou's horrified, unbelieving gaze was riveted on Lupe Geroux. The impossible was taking place before his very eyes. Her tiny pink ears were shaping into long, hairy, monstrous things. Her arms had developed paws at the wrists; and the paws had reached up and snatched the headdress from her hair. Already the lovely face was lengthening and shaping itself into that of a wolf.

He heard Skwirly moan in terror; and even Mark threw his hand before his eyes, as though to shut out the sight. Lou didn't wait for the rest of the floor show. He'd seen enough.

Before any of them realized his intentions he had twisted away from Skwirly and was streaking for the door. Somewhere, a clock began to toll the midnight hour. The solemn sounds lent wings to his flying feet. His long legs made short work of the stone stairs. Behind him he could hear a horrible, growling sound.

As he reached the top of the stair he looked behind and saw a huge wolf-shape hard at his heels. He let out a howl of horror and lit out for the lobby. Then he made a mistake. Instead of turning left when he came through the door, which led to the stairs, he turned right. That brought him back to the room in which he had slept. It was too late to turn back. He dashed in and leaped upon the bed, drawing the cov-

ers over his head to shut out the sight and sound of what was after him.

But it was to no avail. For immediately afterward he felt a huge body land there beside him. The werewolf, in her haste to reach Lou, had skidded on one of the bearskin rugs into the suit of armor. And with the sound of the animal body striking the bed, there was the louder crash of steel falling to the floor.

Lou didn't hear the suit of armor fall. Lou didn't hear anything after the wolf landed on the bed.

Lou had fainted!

HE OPENED his eyes slowly. His mind was blank for several seconds, then memory returned. Lupe Geroux, Mark, Skwirly, and what had happened.

"What a dream!" he said as he turned on his side for greater comfort. And stopped turning. Almost stopping breathing. There beside him on the bed, was the figure of a beautiful woman. He didn't have to look twice. It was Lupe Geroux, and she was asleep. Carefully he maneuvered his body to the edge of the bed. He was glad to see that he was dressed as he had been when he had first come to this mad hotel. Slowly his baggy, flannel-clad legs slid over the edge of the bed and found the floor. The rest of his body carefully followed.

He took a single stealthy step away from the bed and a soft, sweet voice inquired:

"Where are you going now?"

Lou didn't bother turning to answer her. He just made feet in the direction of the door. She almost beat him to it, though. She was a close second at that point, but Lou still had to negotiate the lobby and stairs to the street.

He noticed, in passing, that cobwebs had formed across the door through

which the old man had come the night before. He had no time to investigate them, however. He was too busy getting to the street.

His hand was on the doorknob, at the finish; and her hand was on his shoulder. It was a tie. Lou had lost. They walked out into the street together, her hand holding his.

"Look, beautiful" Lou said in desperation as they stopped on the walk, "I've got a job to take care of, things to do, places to go. I can't be lugging you around with me all day. You understand, don't you?"

He had to admit that she had the most disconcerting faculty of not paying attention to him. Just now she was looking with wide enraptured eyes at the street scene before her.

It was just a beat-out street at the tail end of Chicago's loop. Besides themselves, there was only a bum, sleeping off a night's "smoke" drunk on a Keep the City Clean refuse box, to be seen. It was the hour of dawn, that hour when all the joints and flops on the street called it a night and went to bed. It was still too early for the workers and shoppers to come down.

She turned her gaze back to Lou and said:

"I think I shall like this place. But you must find me a castle. It is not right that Lupe, head of the Ancient Order of Werewolves, shall be without a castle."

Lou was beginning to wish more and more that he had gone on to Moe's Mansions the night before.

"Ancient Order of Werewolves," he muttered. "How nice! I suppose the initiation fee is two quarts of blood."

"Oh no," she corrected him. "For you, it will be just a couple of pints."

"The Red Cross isn't going to like this," he warned her, "I've got an appointment with them for tomorrow."

They were brought back to their surrounding by a strange voice whining hoarsely:

"Could you spare a guy the price of a cuppa coffee?"

LOU turned and looked into the unshaven, unwashed face of the bum who had been asleep on the refuse box. His hand reached down into a pants pocket and pulling out one of the chips he had won at Casey's Castle, said:

"Don't be so unpatriotic. Besides, a cup of coffee would probably kill you."

He tossed the chip and said, "Go out there and get yourself a meal. Now scram."

But the mooch seemed to have forgotten about Lou. He was staring at the girl with a frank and embarrassing intentness. Lou looked at her again and realized that although her attire would have been the fashion at the Order of Werewolves ball, it might be a little too spectacular for daytime wear in Chicago's Loop.

"Beat it 'bo!" he said savagely, "You made me for a touch. Hit the road before I holler Copper!"

The bum shuffled off, still looking at her over his shoulder.

Lou stood silent for several seconds, lost in thought. What was he going to do with her? He couldn't just let her run around loose, to play blood-bank on an unsuspecting public. Nor could they just stand around like this all day. If there were only some spot that was open this early. But of course there was! Lou remembered now!

He whistled a cruising cab to a stop.

"C'mon, tutz," he said, hustling her into the cab. "I'm going to show you things." To the driver he said:

"Opal Theatre, on Elm and Clark."

He leaned back on the seat beside her, quite pleased with himself at the way he had solved that problem. That

is, until she brought up the one that was bothering her.

"Are you taking me to my castle?"

"Uh—your castle?" he stammered. "Yes, of course. Well, beautiful, I sort of want to surprise you. We won't go there until later. At night, sometime."

She reached out and patted his hand reassuringly.

"How right you are," she said. "It will be so much better at night."

The cab pulled up before the Opal Theater, an "open all night, fifteen cents" movie house. The cashier's sleep-hungry eyes flickered in startled wonder at the strange couple that had come out of the cab.

Lou noticed his questioning look, and throwing thirty cents through the slot in the glass, said:

"Don't mind her. She's just practicing up for Hallowe'en."

IT WASN'T till they were in the lobby that Lou noticed what was being shown that day. A double feature, with those meanies of the movies, Frankenstein and Dracula.

"Wonder what Frankie and Dracie would think of their little sister, Lupe," was his grim thought as he piloted her down the aisle.

"Why that's Dracula," she said, as they sat down.

"Friend of yours, hunh?"

"Sh!" she whispered. "I want to observe his technique."

After watching the screen in silence for a few minutes, Lupe gave vent to a vexed, "Oh, no!"

"Something wrong?" Lou asked.

"Yes. It is just as they say. He's the old-fashioned type of practitioner."

On the screen, Dracula was engaged just then in sharpening his teeth on the heroine's jugular vein. The heroine wasn't too happy about what was going on. Either that, or she had decided

it was time to practice her singing lesson.

"Well," said Lou, after watching the scene, "I don't know whether he's old-fashioned or not. But I do know he's the sort of guy who likes to get his teeth into things."

"You don't understand," she said condescendingly. "But after midnight you will."

Lou waited till his heart stopped playing skip-rope with his tonsils, then said falteringly:

"After—midnight?"

"Yes, dear, without fail this time." On which happy note she became silent and absorbed in the movie.

Lou's mind was busily at work. There was only one thing wrong with that. It was working in a circle. A circle that began and ended with Lupe. He knew he could leave her there and sneak out. But he also realized the consequences. No, he had to stick with her until nightfall. Then he must think of some way to get rid of her. Permanently!

The guy sitting beside Lou decided it was time to wake up then. He went through all the motions of a man awakening after an eight-hour sleep in a movie house seat. After his fifth stretch and third satisfied groan, he turned to see who his neighbors were. He looked at Lou for a second, then bent forward to see who else was sitting in their row.

He snapped back to a sitting position so fast Lou thought it was done with a spring. A quavery frightened voice whispered:

"If she's doing what I think she's doing, I wish she'd stop. It's the first time I've seen anything like this, sober."

Lou looked into the man's frightened face, then turned to see what Lupe was doing; and felt the hair at the back of

his neck rise up.

Lupe had become so excited at what was taking place on the screen she had forgotten for a moment where she was. She was busily engaged in going through her transformation act of changing into a wolf; then back into a woman. She was doing it so fast Lou got dizzy watching her. He dug his elbow into her ribs and said:

"Stop that, before Dracula complains to the management that you're crabbing his act."

She returned to normal and Lou turned to the guy in the seat beside him. But he had left. Lou smiled to himself as he thought:

"Probably gone out to get drunk again, if that's what he sees when he's sober."

IT WAS some time during the afternoon that Lupe awoke Lou by saying:

"Do they have anything to eat here?" I'm hungry."

"Sure, tutz," he answered between yawns. "I'll run out and rustle up a few hamburgers."

"Hamburgers? What are they?"

Lou explained.

"Well, never mind the bread," she said. "Just bring mine—raw."

It was in the hamburger hut, several doors from the theater, that Lou found the answer to what he was going to do with her. So she wanted a castle. Well, she was going to get one, all right.

He paid the cashier and walked out. But instead of going back into the show, he walked down several doors to where Harry the Hock had his pawn shop. Lou was an old victim of Harry's.

"Look, Harry," he said to that well-worn clip-artist, "I'm looking for something I can wrap around a woman."

Harry whose love for the opposite sex was a by-word, said:

"Ah, yes, I have just the thing for you. Six yards of rope and two pairs of handcuffs. Absolutely guaranteed to do a good job. Cheap, too."

"No, no, Harry you don't get it," Lou explained. "I want a robe or a cape. Something to put over an evening gown."

Harry brought out a long cape. Lou saw that it would fit Lupe. Harry wanted ten dollars for it. Lou wanted to give five; and after exchanging a few pleasantries with each other about their immediate forebears they parted company. Harry rang up Lou's ten dollars and Lou went back to the show.

He gave the raw meat to Lupe and they satisfied their appetites for the next few minutes. He kept hearing peculiar sounds coming from her and finally had to say:

"Stop snuffing over your food like that. People will think they're at the zoo."

Satisfied at last, she put her head on his shoulders and went to sleep. He didn't wait long to follow her example.

When he awoke again he looked at his wrist-watch. The hour hand was on nine.

"O.K." beautiful," he said, shaking her into wakefulness. "We got to go places."

He put the cape over his shoulders and saw that it was an excellent fit. It also covered that fish net she was wearing.

"Where do we go now?" she wanted to know.

He didn't bother to answer. Instead, he tucked her arm under his and started off down the street. In a few minutes they came again to that flop-house where he had spent the night before.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

He wondered why there was a laugh in her voice. He stopped wondering

when he tried to open the door. It wouldn't! He stood silent for a second, scratching his head. The plans he had made were blown sky-high now. He had thought to get her back on the bed, knock her out, tip the suit of armor over and scam.

The man who had been leaning against the 'L' pillar watching them walked over.

"Help you, fella?" he asked.

"Yeah," Lou said. "When'd they close this joint up?"

"Oh," the other replied, "about ten years ago."

"Ten years ago?" yelled Lou. "You're nuts! Why I slept in there last night."

"Better take your boy-friend home, lady. He's had a little too much," the bystander said to Lupe.

Lou felt himself go weak. He had remembered. Ten years ago and this flop-house! All he wanted was the answer to one question.

"Wait just a second, fella," he begged. "Just tell me what happened here ten years ago?"

"Ten years ago," the other explained, "a man was found murdered in one of the rooms. His throat had been torn open, as though a wolf had gotten at him."

LOU had his answer.

He wished he hadn't asked the question, now. It made everything so clear. He was Lou P. Geroux and she was Lupe Geroux, and after midnight they would both be *loupe-garou*. Unless—she died before then. But how?

Lupe came close to him and said:

"Come! Take me to my castle. 'Tis of no avail to wait here. And too, I am getting thirsty."

"Yeah, I know. Blood-thirsty," Lou groaned. "Well, don't look at me like that," he went on "the doctor keeps

telling me I'm anemic. You know. No muscles in my corpuscles."

She had been looking at him as though she had discovered the Fountain of Youth.

"Please, beautiful," Lou said hurriedly, "can't you think of anything else besides your castle and my blood?"

"I can't help it if I'm thirsty," she said petulantly. "And if I can't get a drink from you then I'll go to someone else."

"No, wait, baby," Lou said grinning broadly.

He knew what he was going to do now. So she was thirsty and wanted a castle. He was going to satisfy both desires.

He looked around for a cab and spotting one signalled to the driver. As they got in he loudly instructed the driver to go to "Casey's Castle, over on Will Street."

Casey himself greeted them as they came through the door.

"Ah, Louie, my frand. How'sa eet going, keet?"

"Fine, Casey, fine. Got a nice table for me and the babe here?" Lou said, edging her past the imposing mound of Casey's belly.

"For you, keet, I got da bast," Casey replied.

"Hey, Murphy," he called to a little dark-faced man. "Geeve Louie a table. And something to dreenk. And breeng me da beel when hes'a troo. He don't add too good."

Casey called all his waiters Murphy. It was the only Irish name he could pronounce.

But Lou had already found a table. In a dark corner.

Lupe looked about her and said:

"So this is our castle? I had somehow pictured something different. But then again, perhaps in your world this is considered fine."

"This ain't so bad, kid," Lou assured her, his gaze wandering around the crowded room. He was glad to see that none of his friends was there. Introducing Lupe to them would have been too much.

The little, dark, waiter came over and stood silently waiting for Lou to order.

"A double-bourbon for the lady," Lou said, "and a coke for me."

"Yes sir. And what kind of chaser?"

"Oh, give her a shot of gin for a chaser!" Lou answered.

"What is this double-bourbon, you have ordered for me," she asked, when the waiter had left.

"This country's favorite thirst-quencher," he assured her, "and you are thirsty, you know."

THE drinks arrived and she sipped hers reflectively.

"Not that way," Lou said. "Like this," and he tossed his coke down in one swallow.

She followed suit, while Lou watched to see what effect the drink would have.

She put the glass down, wrinkled her nose at him and said:

"It's sort of bitter, but I like it."

"That's fine. And now the chaser."

"The chaser?"

"Yeah. The little glass there."

"Oh" she said in surprise. "I didn't know what you meant. But where's yours?"

"I don't get one, with what I'm drinking. How about another drink, beautiful?" he asked.

"Yes, I think I'll have another," she said.

Lou kept looking furtively at his watch while they were drinking. He saw it was already eleven o'clock. His eyes watched her narrowly to observe the effects of the liquor. Insofar as he

could see, she was as sober as when they had come in. And that was no good. Not at all! She had to get drunk. Falling-down drunk! Yet here she was, seemingly sober. And she'd already had four double-bourbons, with four gin chasers.

The orchestra had come out and started the dancing off with a Conga tune.

Lupe watched the convolutions of the Conga line which had formed, and finally asked:

"What are they doing?"

Lou explained. She nodded her head as though she understood. The orchestra finished that number and started into that popular number, *Black Magic*.

Lou noticed her fingers were tapping out the beat on the table top. She looked up at him coyly and said:

"I'd like to danch too! But lesh have another bouble-dourbon." She shook her head, reprimandingly. "I meam, durble-burble, first."

A vast smile of joy broke out on Lou's face as he heard her stumbling words. She was getting stiff at last. He signaled for another drink and after she downed hers, they went out on the dance floor.

The orchestra was small but good. They were playing the song in a slow rhumba beat, which gave the effect of jungle rhythm.

Her forehead nestled smoothly against his chin. She danced surprisingly well; but after a few seconds, Lou began to wish that she had taken a closer shave.

"Taken a closer shave?" he thought, as they moved about in the dance. "I must be getting drunk on Coca-Cola! Even if she did shave, that would be a hell of a place for hair to grow. On her forehead!"

But now her forehead felt smooth

again. The orchestra began to play a faster, wilder tempo; and Lou became a little lost in the music. Again he felt that scratchy feeling of rough, coarse hair against his chin. He was becoming annoyed by it. He pushed Lupe away a little and looked more closely at her. He wished, then, he hadn't.

WHETHER it was the music or the bourbon that was to blame, he didn't know. Nor did he care. He knew only that she had started to play again. For his fascinated and horrified eyes were looking into the reddish eyes of a wolf. The long triangular head was only inches removed from his.

A cold sweat broke out all over him, as he saw the long sharp teeth dripping saliva and fouling his face with a carnal odor.

He wasn't the only one to notice the change. He had stopped dancing and a couple bumped into them. The woman turned her head in annoyance and saw Lou's partner. She promptly fainted. Her partner watched her slide to the floor. Then he looked over at Lou and Lupe to see what had made her faint. Lou had to admit the woman had fainted more gracefully than the man.

Lupe was getting more and more excited. It became increasingly difficult to tell with whom he was dancing—a woman or a wolf. Gradually other couples on the floor became aware of what was taking place. And soon Lou found himself dancing on a deserted floor.

Someone had told Casey of what was taking place. He came bustling forward just as the orchestra finished playing. He was just in time to see Lupe making her last change, from wolf to woman. Then Lou dragged her back to their table.

Lou said disgustedly:

"Can't you control yourself a little

more? What will people think? As though you give a damn!"

He looked up to find Casey, his eyes wide with wonder staring at Lupe.

"I saw eet!" Casey said in awestruck tones. "What were you doing? Wonderful! Marvelous! Superb!"

"What's wrong with you now?" Lou demanded. But Casey had eyes and ears only for Lupe.

"You mus' come to work for me," Casey said to her, "I weel pay you anything you want. Dat is, almost anytheeng."

"Yeah, I know," Lou broke in on Casey's ramblings. "Almost anything but money. Sorry, fat-stuff, the lady isn't interested."

"Don't say this," Casey begged. "What she was doeeng, I have never see before. People weel come from everywhere to see her do thees dance."

"It's no soap," Casey," Lou said firmly, as he threw the cape around her shoulders. "The lady isn't interested in a dancing career. She has other plans, haven't you dear?"

She looked at him and he saw the fever in her eyes.

"Yeah," she said softly. She swayed a little as she talked. "I have something else to do tonight. And it will be very shoon now."

"You're right," Lou said as they walked past the still pleading Casey. "It won't be long now."

The air outside was cool, but Lou felt as though he were being consumed by some fever. There was only a quarter-hour left before midnight.

"We're in the stretch now, beautiful," he said as they walked down the dark street, "and I'm going to show you our castle."

She cocked her head to one side as she said:

"I thought you shaid, *that* was our cashle."

"Now, tutz," he answered, "I was just kidding. Wait'll you see our castle. You'll understand."

A DRUNK reeled past them and leaned against the wall of a building. Something about his helpless attitude struck a chord in Lupe. Before Lou knew what had happened, she was no longer with him. He barely reached them in time. For she had already tilted the drunk's head back and was about to sink her teeth into his throat when Lou dragged her away. She turned savagely on him then, and for a few seconds he had his hands full with her.

"Wait," he panted, as he twisted away from her hungry mouth, "not yet. Damn you." Her teeth had clicked futilely an inch from his throat. "Not here. Let's go where we can be comfortable."

He shook her savagely and she relaxed at last.

"Hurry," she whispered, "the time will soon be here for us, when we can slake our thirst. You and I. We will hunt together, then."

Almost at a run, he made for his objective, literally dragging her with him. They ran up the stairs and he threw two dimes at the cashier.

The elevated platform was, for once, almost deserted. Lou had counted on that. He knew this station was usually that way at this hour.

"Look," he said, pointing through the small glass windows. "There: your castle!"

She looked to where his finger was pointing and saw the gleaming white beauty of the Wrigley Building.

"Aah!" her voice came out in a long drawn sigh, "that is a castle fit for Lupe Geroux! But why are we here?"

"Because you are thirsty for blood," he said, "and this is where you will find enough."

He knew that a train pulled into this station at just this hour. Already he could see its lights a hundred yards off.

"Come," he said, maneuvering her toward the edge of the platform. "I want to show you something."

He stood behind her as she looked toward the approaching train.

"What is it?" she asked, turning her head toward him.

He smiled at her. There was no humor in the smile. His voice was soft, emotionless:

"Curtains, baby — for you," and pushed.

THE train pulled in with a dull roar. There was a single loud squeal as the front trucks ground over her body. It sounded as though some animal had cried out in death.

There was a strange smile on Lou P. Geroux's face. He had just committed murder; yet the smile was that of a man who had been cleansed of some horrible thing. He was standing there, his head still bent forward, when he felt a hand twist him around.

Riley had just gone off duty. Technically, he was a few minutes early. But he always left his post a few minutes early when he had the night watch. The train coming in now was the one that took him home. And if he missed this one, there would be a half-hour wait for another. Riley didn't like waiting.

So it was that he saw what had taken place. He jerked Lou around savagely.

"Got ya!" he cried out in triumph. "Right in the act." Then, as Lou looked at him blankly: "You must be nuts, to think you could get away with that!"

The 'L' platform had been empty a few moments before. Now it seemed as though all the people in the Loop had come up. Lou was almost completely

surrounded by the curious crowd.

The engineer of the train had left his cab and now stepped forward.

"I saw him do it, Officer," he said. "He waited till I pulled in and then he shoved her out on the tracks."

The crowd thrilled in horror.

"Well," Riley asked, "what have you got to say before I take you in?"

"Nothing," Lou said calmly, "except that I'm glad I did it. Someone had to do it. She was too great a menace to be let run around."

Riley kept a firm grip on the unprotesting reporter.

"Think you can back the train up, so's we can get to the woman?" he asked the engineer.

"We might be able to," the engineer replied. "The front trucks were the only ones to hit her."

He got back into his cab and slowly began the business of putting the car into reverse. Only Lou noticed that a nearby clock began to strike the midnight hour.

But when the wheels came free of what lay beneath them, a gasp of amazement was wrung from the crowd. Even Lou started in surprise.

For instead of a woman, a huge, gray she-wolf lay on the tracks. The wolf had been decapitated by the car wheels and Lou saw that a long wooden sliver from the rail-bed had penetrated its heart.

"Well I'll be——" Riley began, as

he looked down at the dead animal.

"Yes, Officer?" Lou asked.

"I'll swear I saw you push a woman down there," Riley said.

"I'm afraid the sergeant wouldn't believe you," Lou reminded him.

Riley scratched his head in perplexity. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. And there was no use looking in the book of regulations he carried. There was nothing in there about pushing a wolf off an 'L' platform.

"Well," he said resignedly, "look's like I'll have to let you go."

"Just a minute, Officer," Lou said, stopping him. "Isn't there a bounty on killing wolves in this state? And didn't you see me struggling with this wolf, finally pushing it in front of the train?"

Riley nodded.

"Well," said Lou, showing his press pass, "don't forget to put that in your report. I could use that hundred dollars very nicely."

Lou smiled at the retreating figure of the policeman. His thoughts were pleasant.

"So the editor is going to get his story and I'm going to get a hundred bucks and Lupe will no longer be thirsty. It looks like a perfect ending for this story!"

But he couldn't understand why he suddenly wanted to howl at the moon—like a wolf.

NEW USE FOR BLOOD PLASMA

ACCORDING to Dr. John B. Johnson, of the University of Rochester School of Medicine, one patient that had been totally disabled by hemophilia was able to again do light work after being given weekly injections of 125 cc. of plasma.

The great demand for plasma by the armed forces has prevented Dr. Johnson from giving regular injections to all of his patients but he considers the plasma treatment for incipient hemorrhages as the most feasible plan yet attempted to

put victims of the dread hemophilia back on their feet.

Since the purpose of transfusions is to introduce into the patient's blood stream something that will hasten the clotting time when the patient is injured, plasma, which is equal to whole blood in clotting ability, can be used. In addition, plasma is superior to whole blood, since it does away with the typing operation that consumes valuable time in which the patient may even bleed to death.

The PLACE IS

**Ghosts can be a definite asset,
Kerwin discovered, if you can find
a way to persuade them to cooperate**

Kerwin whirled back in time to see
a hand holding out a bit of paper



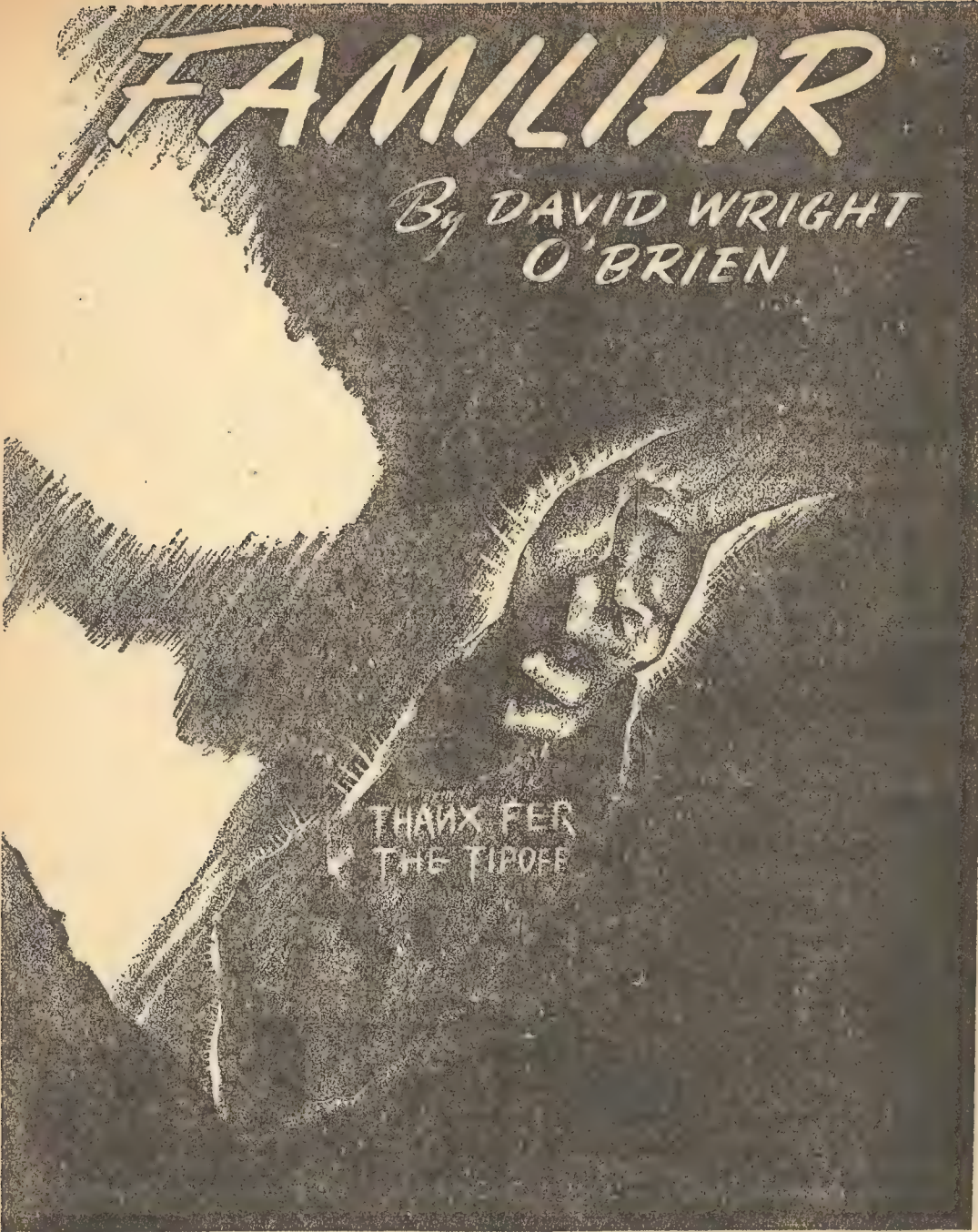
IT WAS one of those balmy late New England spring days and everything along the country-side was fresh and verdant and pretty wonderful. We had been about four hours on the road from New York—four hours

away from the stink of carbon monoxide, the scream of traffic and the hundred million other nerve-shattering nuisances that people call life in the big city.

I filled my lungs with fresh New

FAMILIAR

By DAVID WRIGHT
O'BRIEN



THANKS FOR
THE TIPOFF

England air.

"What a couple of fools we were,"
I told Lynn.

She didn't answer. She was looking
somewhat stonily at the crouching
chrome nymph atop the hood of our low

slung convertible.

This didn't faze me. Lynn was going
to take a lot of selling on this idea, and
the battles we had had over it in the
past month were unrivalled on any list
in the War Atlas.

I turned my attention back to the road.

It had been almost a month to the day when I told Lynn that I was through with the job I'd been holding down in her father's brokerage house—was through with the stupid, smug, money-counting monotony of the life I had been leading.

Naturally she thought I was kidding.

"That's very funny, Tommy," Lynn had smiled, "and I suppose it's prompted by a chance encounter with one of your friends from your Bohemian and collegiate periods."

"I'll ignore that remark," I told her pleasantly enough, "and try to make my point more clear. I'm through, finished, washed-up with this washed-out parody of a life I've been living. When we married two years ago you persuaded me to step into your father's firm just long enough to pile up a nest egg to tide me over for a year working on that book in my system."

A knowing look had come into Lynn's eyes. Her voice suddenly took on a too sweetly humoring tone.

"Now, Tommy," she began, "haven't we gone over this ground before?"

"Yes indeed," I agreed.

"Then it is really very silly, isn't it, to go into the matter again when we've both agreed——"

I cut her off. "We've never agreed on anything concerning this issue, Lynn, and you know it. The last time I brought it up was over six months ago. You pointed out, at the time, that it was ridiculous to consider the matter since we hadn't nearly enough put away to tide us over the year of my big effort."

"And the situation isn't altered a bit since that time, Tommy," Lynn said. "You've still got to face the same cold facts. We're quite able to live comfortably and with a reasonable metropolitan decency on your salary. But it just hap-

pens that we can never get a cent put aside in the bank. What do you expect us to live on while you're off in some deep forest for a year banging away at a typewriter?"

I smiled.

"I'll ignore the forest remark, since you know damned well that all I had in mind was a place in New England—something with peace and quiet and serenity."

Lynn cut me off.

"Well, forest, farm, or houseboat, we still just wouldn't be able to manage it."

I held up my hand, grinning like a cat picking canary feathers from its front teeth.

"But that, my pet, is precisely where you are in error. We have just enough to take care of the matter comfortably."

LYNN almost lost her lovely white teeth in surprise. And while she was doing a double take, I continued to smirk.

"Wha—, what on earth are you talking about?" she spluttered.

"I am merely announcing the fact that I have at present in a private bank account some four thousand dollars, gained within the last three months on modest stock speculations of my own. And that, takes care of that."

It had.

Not as simply as that of course. My announcement had been merely the opening gun in a month-long siege. Lynn used every device known to the wiles of women in an effort to shake me from my purpose. She sulked, she cajoled, she pleaded, she shrilled, and, of course, wept profusely. But I went right along my merry way visiting real estate brokers, renting agents and resort proprietors in my search for a suitable Shang-ri-la.

When, at the end of three weeks, I'd picked the site of my great adventure,

I announced the fact to Lynn. That was the signal for her to rush the reserves into the fray—said reserves being her father—also my employer—her mother, and her somewhat neurotic sister, Katherineine.

I had expected this. I was all set to trump her ace in the hole. All it took was dogged, solid refusal all around. Old Oliver Jerem, my dear father-in-law, acted about as could be expected. He warned me against my folly from each of his dual roles.

"This is quite preposterous, Thomas," he boomed. "Absolutely unheard of. The thought of Lynn becoming some—some farmhand is absolutely ridiculous. She would be utterly miserable under any such circumstances. She has been raised for something quite a lot better than what you are planning to force her into."

"Undoubtedly you raised her," I agreed amiably enough. "And undoubtedly it must have been some job. But whether or not you raised her, I married her. She is my wife. I think that establishes my viewpoint clearly enough."

Then, of course, the old boy had taken another tack. He brought in, but heavily, his second role—that of my employer.

"Is it that you are dissatisfied with your position in our firm, Thomas? If that's the case, young man, let me assure you that the board of directors and I have been giving considerable attention to your progress of late. We feel that you're just ready for a big step upward. There isn't a young man on Wall Street who wouldn't give a million dollars for a chance such as yours. Any idiocy on your part in your career would be disastrous. I'd never be able to explain it to the board, and this great chance would undoubtedly be lost you forever."

"If you must explain it to the board," I told him, "you might say that I have never enjoyed working with or for them in their marts of money, nor had ever any intention of making a lifetime job of wearing their harness. I am a writer. Or at least I think I am, enough to take a whack at trying to prove it. If it turns out that I'm a dud, well, perhaps I'll slide meekly back into whatever niche they can make for me. But I don't think it's going to turn out that way. Now, do you think that would be sufficient explanation?"

LYNN'S mother tried her hand at that point.

"But, Tommy, it is so utterly insane. If you really want to write I am sure Oliver could make some connections with some solid, sensible, financial journals that would be only too glad to have you contribute articles to them now and then."

I didn't have any trouble at all squelching her brief, futile, and somewhat hysterical two-cents worth.

"In which case," I smiled sweetly, "I'd undoubtedly wind up turning out all my copy on an adding machine instead of a typewriter. I'm afraid you didn't get the idea at all. I want to write; not bore a lot of bumble-headed business big-shots into a stupor."

Lynn's neurotic sister, Katherineine, had strangely enough kept out of it. And I looked expectantly to her for a few well-chosen words on my future. She didn't have any, but the snide glances she and her tailor's dummy husband, Walter, exchanged, seemed just a little too secretive to suit me.

I looked around the family circle then to Lynn.

"It's been so nice to have had this little talk, and even better still to clear the air. Now I think we'd better be going. There is so much to be done in

tying up the loose ends of our past life, that we'll have to do a lot of rushing if we are going to be able to move into the little New England place I have picked out on the day I've arranged for."

That had been the climax—but not entirely the end of the matter. Lynn had with a great deal of martyrdom helped a bit in tying up some of the loose ends. There was our little too-expensive apartment in Manhattan to be gotten rid of, a matter of storage for much of our gilt-edged furnishings, and my solemnly worded resignation from Jerem and Jeffers, Investment Brokers, Inc., and the usual last minute extrania which crop up to plague any such departure.

But at last we were on our way—and this was it.

Lynn still was carrying a shield of martyrdom and a considerable amount of hostility. But she was with me, beside me in fact, and we were now approximately two miles from Chatam, the sleepy, pleasant little New England village beyond which lay our new home.

Waiting for us in Chatham would be a short, thin-featured, nasal-voiced realty dealer named, appropriately enough, Abner Land. He was a representative of the New York firm through which I had located the comfortable, cleverly modernized New England farmhouse in which we would make our stay. Land had the lease ready to be signed, sealed and turned over. In his possession too, were the keys and information concerning the handywoman and cook I had engaged to make Lynn's martyred lot somewhat less vulnerable to squawks.

IT WAS Friday and scarcely noon.

Lynn and I had managed to get an early start, and I had figured this to be a particularly bright idea inasmuch as it would be better for Lynn's first sight

of the place to occur in the bright sunshine of such an ultra-pleasant sunny afternoon.

The place I had rented was really quite a find and, frankly, I was damned well pleased with myself. It was a two-story, eight-roomed affair that had only last summer been done over completely on the specifications of a well-known architect who had taken a fancy to the place, bought it, done the remodeling, and for some zany and temperamental reason stayed there only a couple of weeks. It hadn't been occupied since, but was—thanks to the directions of the New York realty firm—now awaiting us in perfectly ship-shape condition.

I had no delusions that Lynn's first glimpse of the house was going to be all that would be necessary to change her from blackness and rebellion to sweetness and light. But certainly she'd be forced into a grudging sort of liking for the place, and some of the ice at present encrusting her attitude would be thawed. The additional melting—which would of course take a little bit more time—would be up to me. And I was determined to carry through a concerted softening and selling campaign that would eventually have her chirping with a robin-like delight at our new life in our new surroundings.

Lynn suddenly said: "How much farther on is Chatam?"

"A few minutes more, baby," I told her. "You'll really get a kick out of the little village. It's hard to find anything there that's changed since the days of Ichabod Crane. Characters are strictly Yankee, strictly rustic, strictly nice people. It'll take a little time for us to get on really friendly terms with them, since they aren't the sort to accept strangers—particularly big city strangers—with pop-eyed joy."

"I'm sure I'll love it," Lynn said icily. "Perhaps I'll be able to go to tat-

ting circles with the women of the vesper society, and you'll be making speeches in the town hall, in no time at all. I can scarcely wait."

I sighed, turned my attention back to the road. We were coming to the top of a high hill now, and in the little valley below and beyond it lay the village of Chatam. . . .

IT wasn't hard to find the office of Abner Land. It was smack in the center of the village, right on the main street. He was locking the front door of his place as we pulled up in front of it.

"Hello, there!" I yelled.

He turned, saw the roadster, turned back and opened his office door again.

"How'do?" he yelled back nasally.

"Was jest going out fer some lunch."

"Come on, baby," I told Lynn, climbing out of the car. "I'd like to have you meet Mr. Land."

"I'd rather wait here in the car," Lynn said frigidly.

"Sure," I grinned. "Sop up some sunshine. I'll only be a minute."

"Made good time," Abner Land observed, as I followed him into his musty little office. "Didn't expect you'd be here till a few hours later."

"We got an early start. Lease all ready to sign?"

Abner Land got out the lease.

"Sure is," he said. "Year's payment in advance, special rate of nine hundred and thirty-two dollars, in full."

I handed him the certified check I'd had made out for that amount, signed the necessary papers including the lease, and he turned over the keys to me.

"How about the cook and handywoman?" I asked. "Been able to find one for us?"

"She'll be out there sometime this afternoon," Land said.

"That's fine," I told him. "Then there's nothing else to take care of."

"Good woman, too" said Abner Land. "Her name's Marthy, Marthy Spingler."

"Huh? I mean, oh—yes, I see. You mean the cook and handywoman," I said. "Of course. Martha Spingler. Fine. We'll be expecting her in time to prepare the dinner."

"Place been all cleaned up, shiny new," Abner Land said. "Everything you'll need, excepting fodder, will be on hand."

"That's fine, Mr. Land," I said, taking his skinny hand and pumping it enthusiastically. "I'm sure everything is going to be just dandy."

Abner Land gave me a grin that I didn't remember as being somewhat peculiar until later.

"Might be at that," he conceded.

OUTSIDE, I started up the car again and turned to grin at Lynn.

"We're all set, honey," I told her. "Lease and keys are in my pocket and the world is in our arms. The future is bright and shining, and our cook will be out in time to prepare dinner tonight."

Lynn permitted herself to enter the conversation slightly.

"Let me see the lease," she said. "It might be a good thing if it were looked over carefully. After all, if we should decide that we didn't want to stay on, we wouldn't want to be committed to some ghastly bargain. I understand these Yankee traders are sharp."

I decided to pass over her crack about *our* deciding that we didn't want to stay on. I took the lease out of my pocket and gave it to her.

We drove along in silence, leaving the little village of Chatam and starting westward in the direction of our new place. Lynn maintained the silent status quo, and from the corner of my eye I could see her frowningly trying to make

something from the whereofs and whereases in the fine print.

After a little while, Lynn looked up.

"Tom," she said puzzledly, "it says here that, quote, 'the party of the first part is' . . . Never mind, skip it."

"Sure," I said, grinning inwardly. Lynn knew as much about such matters as a child, but she wasn't going to pass up an opportunity to pretend differently.

I found the turn fork I was looking for, and we went off along a gravel road-way which—if it proved to be the right one—would bring us to our destination in another fifteen minutes.

"Tom!" Lynn said suddenly and very sharply.

I turned. "What now?"

"It says something here that I don't quite understand," she said. "It says something about nine hundred and thirty-two dollars for the year, paid in *advance*, as per agreement. What does that mean?"

"Exactly what it says," I told her. "I got the place for a song, merely by paying up one year in advance, rather than a month at a time. Isn't that clear?"

The expression on Lynn's face was peculiar.

"But a year," she wailed, "in advance. If we should decide to leave, to go back to New York. I mean—if we should find something wrong and decide to get out."

I stopped the car abruptly and turned to face my wife.

"Now look, Lynn," I said quietly. "You know that I decided on a year's fling at the typewriter. Not six months or eight months or ten, but a year. This is the place I picked out. This is where we've planned to spend that year. You knew all that, so what reason can you possibly have for objecting to my picking up a bargain price by paying a year

in advance?"

Lynn didn't answer immediately. She pursed her pretty lips and frowned darkly. Then she said:

"But a year seems so final, so positive."

"The decision I made *is* final, *is* positive," I reminded her. "I'm not embarking on some gay twenty-day lark, baby. I've quit my job with your dad's firm, we've stored our furniture, given up the apartment, and all in all made a clean, definite break."

LYNN didn't answer. She just turned and stared out the window. I put the car into gear and we started off again. Fifteen minutes later, on the other side of a sharp, tree-banked bend in the road, we came upon our new house.

"This, my love, is it," I told Lynn. "Look once and look again. Isn't it a beauty?"

The place did look swell. It had a fresh paint job, and some clever new landscaping, and was bright and spic and welcoming. I felt enormously pleased with myself, and glanced at Lynn to catch her reaction.

She was obviously surprised. Undoubtedly she had expected to be brought out to some gaunt, gray barn in a dismal forest, and this was a million miles in the opposite direction for any such gloomy forebodings.

Yes, indeed, surprise was certainly all over her face. But she was determined not to admit it vocally.

"It looks nice enough," Lynn said without any particular display of cheerleading enthusiasm.

I got a good firm grip on my temper, remembering my plans to soothe and sell her into an adjustment to it all. There was no sense in having our very entrance into the place marred by a wrangling battle.

"That's good," I said as cheerfully as a realty agent. "That's just fine. I'm awfully glad you like it, Lynn. You don't know how hard I tried to pick a place that would appeal to you."

Which was the truth. I knew Lynn's tastes backward and forward, and I had done my level best to find something which would please her eventually, if not immediately.

Lynn got out as we pulled to a stop in the drive in front of the place. I removed the luggage, got back in, and wheeled the convertible around into the garage at the east side of the house.

When I got back from the garage, Lynn was standing beside the luggage on the flagstone walk, staring meditatively at the house. I grabbed up the luggage, and took a deep, gymnasium instructor's breath.

"Ahhhh!" I exhaled. "This is the life—and this is the place to live it! Right, baby?"

Lynn didn't answer that one. She just walked along beside me in silence as we went up the walk. . . .

MOST of our luggage had been unpacked, and clothes placed in order, and the eight rooms of the place inspected one by one inside of the first two hours. Then Lynn and I settled down in the big, roomy cheerfulness of the remodeled parlor, and I tried to get a blaze going in the fireplace.

Lynn was deep in a book she'd started back in town, and didn't look up from it until the first traces of smoke began to seep grayishly back into the living room.

"What on earth are you doing?" she demanded.

I told her that I thought I was making a fire. She told me why didn't I go ahead and make one, then, instead of filling the place with smoke that was enough to choke a person.

I managed to keep my temper, and continued at my fire-making chores, gathering more and more wood from the basket beside the hearth and stuffing loose newspaper pages and innumerable matches into the smoking disorder.

The fumes from my efforts began to get a little worse.

Lynn started to cough. I gave her a quick glance and saw that I was being glared at—but good. The smoke was beginning to fill my eyes and ears and nose, and none of it seemed to want to go up the chimney the way well-trained smoke does.

"Good heavens!" Lynn cried exasperatedly. "Let me fix that thing."

She got up and stamped angrily over beside me. She bent over, leaned forward, and reached up and into the fireplace. There was a sharp noise of something iron being pulled open, and when Lynn sat back on her heels, the smoke was suddenly well-behaved and coursing upward through the chimney.

"You might have had sense enough to open the vent," she told me. "Oddly enough, it's often a great help to a fireplace."

I didn't say anything to that. After all, there wasn't anything that could be said. I left the fireplace and the living room and went back into the kitchen to prow through the larders and see what would be needed in the way of supplies and foodstuffs.

I had almost completed my list when Lynn came out. She asked me what I was doing and I told her.

"I can drive into town and buy the stuff," I said. "I don't imagine we can expect our cook to bring tonight's dinner along with her."

Lynn nodded abstractedly.

"You might try to pick up a nice-sized turkey, Tom," she said suddenly, "for tomorrow night's dinner."

I nodded happily, glad that she was beginning to pitch in with suggestions.

"How many pounds?"

"I think fifteen would be fine," Lynn said.

"Fifteen? That's a lot of bird for two people, baby."

Lynn's eyebrows raised in innocent—too innocent—surprise.

"Oh, didn't I tell you, Tom? I asked Mother and Father and Katherine and Walter out for sort of a housewarming. They'll arrive late tomorrow and leave early sometime Sunday morning."

Of course she hadn't told me. And of course she had deliberately waited until now to do so. It was suspicious, damned suspicious, and I didn't like the sound of it a bit. But I was trying to smooth Lynn's feathers and there was no reasonable objection I could make against their coming.

So I said: "No, Lynn. You didn't tell me about it. But that's fine. That's just fine. I'll like to have them see the place."

"So," said Lynn ambiguously, "would I."

ON THE WAY into the village for groceries, I did a considerable amount of thinking about the guest de-luge that would descend on us the following afternoon. Obviously, it was an inspection trip of sorts, and, just as obviously, there was more behind it than immediately met my eye. My adversaries had not retired in complete confusion, apparently, and the victory I thought I had scored seemed now to have been something less than a rout.

Maybe old Oliver Jerem, Lynn's papa and my ex-boss, was going to bring along a few cards he had forgotten to play in our original argument. Maybe he was going to do something idiotic like refusing to accept my resignation.

It was hard to say what the shrewd-minded old financial bandit had under his handsome white head.

I wondered if the idea for the visit had been Lynn's or her family's, and decided it had probably been the latter's. While she was near them, Lynn's family managed to hoodwink her into anything they wanted. They always did so cleverly, playing on her love for them and their deep affection for her. This fact, of course, had been one of the flies in our marital ointment ever since we'd walked out of the church into a shower of rice.

It had been the clever manipulations of Lynn's family that had forced me into taking that job with her father's firm immediately on our return from our honeymoon. I hadn't intended to do anything of the sort, of course. It had been my plan to use the several thousand I had in the bank at the time to purchase a cabin in the Catskills and get to work on my novel.

But Lynn's family had persuaded her that they were thinking only in terms of our mutual good when they suggested that a nice job awaited me in Jerem and Jeffers brokerage house.

"Just for a bit, dear," they'd told Lynn, "until Tommy has saved enough to carry out his plans handsomely."

I had been trapped into taking the job.

The salary had been good enough, and normal living would have enabled us to save enough in a year—combined with the two grand I had in the bank—to enable me to go through with my delayed plans in super style. But somehow we weren't able to save a damned nickel; and in less than six months, I had gone through the two thousand as well. Lynn's family had been instrumental in this removal of my claws. The merry-go-round of night life and parties and week-ends at swank coun-

try clubs on which we rode kept us broke, and was forced upon us by the shrewd Papa Oliver Jerem, *et al.* They knew, of course, that dough would make me independent, and that with such independence I might do any crazy thing that came into my head—like quitting my much-loathed job and starting my chosen career. So it was seen to that we always had just enough dough to keep up the pace imposed upon us, and never enough to put any away.

It took me almost a year and a half to discover their system, and at the end of that time I started getting a little smart for myself. I watched and waited until a chance came along, and put five hundred bucks on the nose of some stock shares. They came across the line winners, and I had outfoxed the entire Jerem family for good.

A TRUCK, rolling heavily along the highway and holding close to the centerline, made me drop my mental rehashing and concentrate on getting out of its way.

Three minutes later I was in Chatam.

The characters lolling around the local grocery store, which was actually a general store, looked like something out of Floyd Davis illustrations. Yes-siree.

The grocer, or storekeeper, to be more exact, was a lean, long, hawk-nosed New Englander with a Yankee twang that sounded like piano strings breaking.

"Yessiree," he said. "What can I do fer you."

I got out the grocery list and handed it to him.

"I'd like everything you have that's on this list," I said.

He scanned the list and looked up at me interestedly.

"Heap of grub," he said.

I agreed that it was.

"You must be the feller moving in tuh the remodeled place off Kingston Road, eh?"

"That's right," I said. "It's certainly a lovely house."

"Oh, I wun't deny that it's attractive tuh look at," he admitted, turning away to get the first of the stuff on the list. There was something grudging, something odd in the way the storekeeper had said that. He came back with a dozen bars of soap, and I asked him:

"What did you mean when you emphasized the *to look at*?"

The Yankee looked up, putting a stub of pencil behind his ear.

"Did I emphasize that that way?" he asked innocently.

"That's the way I heard it," I told him.

"Wal, now," he twanged. "Mebbe I was a mite careless in my speech. Ferget it." He turned back to the list, scanned it, and walked off to get more supplies.

I was getting impatient. When he came back again, I asked:

"Listen, is there something wrong with the house I rented? Does it have leaks or landslides or earthquakes or something? After all, if there's something out of the way about it, I ought to find out now. I've paid up a year's rental in advance on it, you know."

The storekeeper looked at me sharply.

"Did Abner Land sign you up tuh a year's lease, rent paid in *advance*?" he demanded.

"That's right," I said. "I paid him just a few hours ago."

My Yankee friend broke into cackling laughter.

"Wal, I never!" he exclaimed. "That's a hot'un, all right. That's rich." He cackled some more. He's a sharp'un, that Abner Land. Slick dealing, all right!"

I was getting a little alarmed and a little frantic.

"Listen," I broke in on my store-keeping informer's happy cackling. "Will you tell me why you think my signing a lease on that place and signing for it in advance is so hilarious?"

The Yankee storekeeper stopped laughing.

"Why, stranger," he said "I don't see why not. The place is a plumb white elefant. It's jinxed, that's what. That there architect feller who remodeled it from an old broken down deserted farmhouse only stayed there ten days afore he left and never come back."

"But what's wrong with it?" I demanded.

The storekeeper went back to my shopping list, taking his stub pencil from behind his ear. He looked up long enough to remark casually:

"Everything."

I was getting sore. I leaned across the counter and tapped him on the chest.

"Look, friend," I said. "You started this. Will you please conclude it coherently? What in the hell is the matter with the place I've rented—specifically?"

THE storekeeper gave me a glance, turned away to grab a paper bag, snap it open, and bend over the egg case behind the counter. He didn't answer until he'd filled the bag with two dozen eggs. Then he straightened up and said:

"Hants."

I blinked.

"Hants? What do you mean by—oh, I get it. You mean haunts?"

"That's right. Hants. That's what's wrong."

The wave of relief that swept over me was wonderful. I looked at the lean, dour-faced Yankee storekeeper toler-

antly. He was considerably more rustic than I had imagined.

"Well, well," I grinned. "So the place is haunted."

"Yup."

"That's very funny," I laughed.

"That all depends," said the Yankee.

"Depends on what?"

"Your sense of humor," he said.

I gave him an amused smile. He shrugged, picked up the grocery list and walked to the back of the store to complete the rest of it. When he finally returned, arms full of packages, he put them on the counter with the rest, and said:

"That'll be eight dollars and twenty-two cents."

I got out my wallet.

"I suppose there's a legend that goes with the so-called haunted house I've rented?" I asked dryly.

He took the ten dollar bill I handed him and went over to an early vintage cash register to ring up the sale. He returned with a dollar and seventy-eight cents.

"Eight twenty-two, eight twenty-five, eight seventy-five, nine dollars, ten dollars," he said putting the change in my hand. "Thank you, mister. You need some help carrying these out tuh yer car?"

I looked at the packages.

"No, thanks," I said. "I think I can manage okay."

He helped by piling the stuff into my arms.

"Careful of them eggs," he said. "They're pretty close tuh the top."

He came around the counter and stepped ahead of me to hold the door open. I took the packages out to the convertible and dumped them in the front seat beside me.

I was starting the car before I realized that my rustic Yankee store-

keeper hadn't answered my last question. He hadn't told me if there was a legend to go with the ridiculous local opinion that the house was "hanted."

I put the car in gear, and mentally decided to make a note to check into the quaint superstition on my next trip to town. It would be interesting to hear, even though undoubtedly pretty much standardized according to the usual legends of its sort.

It occurred to me while driving back to the village that the grocery-general store anecdote would be an amusing thing to relate in detail to Lynn, a humorous touch to help unfreeze her icy attitude.

And it occurred to me less than a split second later that it would be the last thing on earth to tell her, for the very thought that there was something off-key about our new home would be all she'd need. Lynn was a modern somewhat intelligent girl, and definitely not given to superstitions. But, of course, she was a woman. Reason is not the prime motivating factor in any action of a member of that sex.

So I decided to forget the incident as far as Lynn was concerned, and I thanked my private gods that she hadn't heard it first.

There was considerably more to think of, anyway. Things such as the matter of the new cook, the settling down, the starting of my novel and, most important at the moment, the week-end visit by Lynn's relatives. I'd have plenty to keep me busy for a bit, without beginning to seep myself in local native folklore.

I TURNED off Kingston Road and onto the gravel roadway leading to our place some fifteen minutes later, and by that time I was deep in the realization that I had forgotten to get in a supply of liquor, and also forgotten to

get the turkey Lynn wanted for the following night's meal. Shrugging them off as best I could, I decided to let both problems ride over until the following day.

Lynn met me at the door after I'd parked the car in the garage.

"The cook has come," she announced.

"Fine," I beamed. "That's great. Like her?"

Lynn followed me into the front room.

"She hasn't cooked anything yet. How can I tell?" she said.

I felt properly rebuffed. I encountered the cook when I marched into the kitchen to dump the load of groceries in my arms. She was a big-boned, tall and angular woman, not especially easy on the most unparticular eyes, and she was busy at the moment polishing the sink.

She looked up at me challengingly.

"Hello," she said. Then, indicating the kitchen table with the end of the small scrub brush in her hand, she said: "Put them there."

I put them there, while the cook's eyes watched the depositing critically. When I had unburdened myself I turned to face her somewhat uneasily.

"I'm Mr. Kelvin," I began. "I'm——"

She cut me off.

"I got eyes," she reminded me. "You sure don't look like no grocery boy."

The sentence might have had some flattering salvation if she hadn't made it sound as though grocery boys were number one on her hit parade.

"And you are Martha Spingler, is that correct?" I asked, wincing at the rebuff.

"Mrs. Spingler," she corrected me. "My first name is Marthy, all right. But people don't use it less'n they know me a spell longer than you have."

"I'm glad to know you Mrs. Sping-

ler," I murmured, backing a hasty retreat from the kitchen. "There are some—uh—groceries. See if you can whip up an evening meal from them. Anything that might be missing on that list—uh—just order on your own hook."

I went back into the living room. Lynn had taken an armchair close to the fireplace and had her nose buried in that book. I didn't feel particularly like an icebreaker at the moment, so I said:

"Did Martha take the bags upstairs, baby?"

Lynn raised one eye from the page.

"I took them up."

"Oh. Oh. That's swell. Thanks, baby. You shouldn't have done it. I—ah—was going to when I got back from the village."

Lynn didn't say anything to that. Her attention went back to the book. I went into the front hallway and removed my coat, hat and gloves.

THEN I decided to go upstairs and unpack the several small suitcases which Lynn had taken up to our room. The bigger part of the luggage had, of course, been moved up there by yours truly on our arrival that afternoon. The stuff Lynn had taken up amounted to four or five bags of overnight size. However, I knew that in her mind she had now firmly established the notion that she'd done all the baggage work unaided.

My week-end grip and overnight case were on the big four-poster bed in our room when I got up there. They lay open, and much of my stuff had been strewn this way and that across the bedcover.

I was a little bit surprised. If Lynn had started to unpack for me there would have been some pattern of order to the scene. You didn't unpack a

bag by ransacking it as thoroughly as my bags had been.

"She's getting nice and spiteful, also," I reasoned. "It's a wonder my shirts and ties and stockings haven't been knotted into granite-like lumps."

It struck me at that moment that—had Lynn been spiteful, or trying to be—she would most certainly have done more than muss up the contents of my luggage, and probably *would* have done some knotting of neckwear and shirt arms.

I frowned, stepped out of the room and walked over to the staircase. I leaned over the bannister and yelled down:

"Lynn, oh Lynn!"

"Yes?" her voice came faintly and in annoyance from the living room.

"Did you open my luggage?"

"Of course I didn't," her voice snapped, considerably more loud this time.

"I just wondered," I muttered. Then: "I just wondered," I yelled.

I went back into the bedroom and stared at the messily opened bags on the bed. Suddenly I thought of Mrs. Spingler, the cook. Her room was down at the end of the hallway.

Stepping out of the bedroom again, I moved somewhat stealthily down to the door at the far end where Mrs. Spingler was to be quartered. In the back of my mind was the idea that suspicion would be pointed at the dour cook if her luggage had already arrived and was in her room—inasmuch as that would point to the fact that she had already been prowling about upstairs with sufficient opportunity to get into our bedroom and mess up my luggage.

I'd soft-shoed less than three yards when I realized what an asinine idea that was.

If Mrs. Spingler were the malicious sort, she wouldn't take spite out on a

total stranger. And if she were dishonest, a professional servant-crook, for example, she would work for us a week or more until she had thoroughly cased the place and decided on what she wanted to run off with. I straightened up out of my crouch and walked back into the bedroom, feeling like a foolish Sherlock Holmes.

Back in the bedroom I sat down and stared gloomily at the opened luggage atop the bed.

Lynn had said that she hadn't opened the luggage. I *knew* I hadn't opened it. And it was silly to suppose the cook, Mrs. Spingler, could have had anything to do with it.

All right. That was fine. That left only one thing to figure out. Who in the hell did do it?

I fished around for a cigarette, found one in my vest pocket, badly crumpled, smoothed it out and lighted it.

I TURNED my attention to the bed again, and in another minute I was overcome once more by a Sherlock complex. I got up and went over to the bed and looked more closely at the disordered mess of shirts, socks, ties, handkerchiefs, and so forth.

If any clues as to the culprit who had put the stuff into that condition were in evidence, I missed them completely. I went over to the window, tested it, found it locked.

Then I thought to look in the closet.

It was disappointingly barren of culprits, fairly well stocked with Lynn's dresses and my suits. I slammed the closet door shut disgustedly and went back to the chair by the window and sat down.

I told myself that I was making a mountain out of a molehill and an unholy ass out of Thomas Kelvin.

"This is ridiculous," I muttered suddenly, getting up. "The locks on both

bags undoubtedly snapped open suddenly as Lynn tossed them on the bed. They probably spilled most of my stuff out on the bed as they sprang open. That's the only reasonable explanation—even if they were both locked the last time I saw them."

I was turning away from the window when I saw the small Ford truck coming up the drive. Lettered on its side was:

"Chatam Electrical Company. Uriah Epply."

The truck stopped in front of the walk, and a small, bald-headed, leather-jacketed, roly-poly chap climbed out. He had a coil of electrical wire in one hand and a tool bag in the other.

I watched him start up the walk, stop, turn around and go back to get something else.

I left the window and went downstairs. Lynn was still in the living room, reading in the armchair near the fireplace. She looked up as I entered.

"What were you doing thumping around up in the attic?" she demanded.

I blinked at her.

"Thumping around up in the attic?" I echoed puzzledly.

"Not thumping, perhaps," Lynn said, "but dragging things around up there, anyway." She glanced at the fireplace. "The sound from the attic carries down through the fireplace here. It was very plain."

I opened my mouth to answer, then thought a minute. The bedroom I had just left was in the south end of the house, not near the attic. The living room was in the north end, and above it two guest bedrooms, and above those, the small attic. What Lynn had said was possible. That is, sounds from the attic, through which the chimney ran, might conceivably come down into the living room.

But I hadn't been in the attic.

"What were you doing up there?" Lynn repeated.

I gagged a moment.

"Oh, nothing much," I gulped. "Nothing at all, really."

The front doorbell rang, at that moment, cutting off the next question that undoubtedly would have followed Lynn's sharply puzzled look.

"I'll answer it," I said hastily.

WHEN I opened the door the little bald fat man from the electrical truck stood there grinning amicably. He had his coil of wire still in one hand, and his tool bag and a small hacksaw in the other.

"Hello," he said. "I'm Uriah Epply, Chatam Electrical Company. Abner Land sent me out here to connect your telephone and all that."

"Oh," I said. "The telephone. I see. Sure. The telephone and all what?"

The little man brushed by me into the hallway.

"And all that," he said.

I followed him through the hallway and into the living room. Lynn looked up again from her reading.

"The man from the electrical company," I explained. "He's going to connect the telephone and—uh—all that."

Lynn went back to her book without comment.

I followed rotund little Uriah Epply through the living room, the dining-room, and into the kitchen. Mrs. Spangler glanced up sharply at our entrance, looked curiously at Epply, and went back to peeling potatoes.

Epply crossed the kitchen to the door at the far end opening down into the cellar. He turned, at the door, and said:

"Main switch down in the cellar."

I nodded, and he opened the door, found a light-switch on the side of the

staircase, snapped it on, and started down the stairs. I followed along behind him.

In the cellar proper, Epply found another light-switch and snapped that on, flooding the place with a sudden glaring illumination.

"You seem to know your way around here," I observed. "You put in all the electrical systems?"

He shook his head, laying down his tool bag and wire coil.

"Nope. Connected the system, though, for the architect fella who had this old place remodeled last year. His contractors come out from New York to lay out the system. Guess he didn't trust us local idjits to get it right. We were only good enough for turning it on when the time came."

"Oh," I said. "I see."

Uriah Epply bent over his bag of tools, opened it, and selected several. Then, whistling sourly through a missing front tooth, he marched over to a wall fuse-and-connection box and opened it.

I went over into a corner and took a seat on a dusty barrel.

"What made the architect move out in such a hurry?" I asked. "Didn't he like the place after he changed it to suit him?"

Epply turned from his work long enough to grin.

"He liked it fine. That is, at first." He went back to work.

Mentally I cursed the laconic strain in all New Englanders. I phrased my next question with a little thought, hoping to put it so I'd get a little more than the usual eyedropper full of information.

"What do you mean by that? I mean, what happened? I'm interested in hearing what you know about it."

Uriah Epply tinkered for a moment while he considered the question. Then

he turned around and thoughtfully jabbed his round chin with a wire snippers.

"Seems like he—this architect fella—didn't realize that this here house was jinxed. Anyways, if he did know it, he seemed to think he could change the jinx by changing the house. Course he couldn't. House looked mighty different when he got through. But underneath, I guess, it was the same old house. Just a different face, if you see what I mean."

"I see what you mean," I said.

URIAH EPPLY *tsked* reflectively, and turned back to work. Again I did some mental cursing, and again phrased another question that would bring forth another droplet of information.

"What was it all about?" I asked.

Uriah Epply looked up from his work.

"All what about?"

I felt like screaming. Instead I said:

"The jinx on the house. How did it start? I mean, how did the story about it start? What makes people around here think it's haunted or jinxed, or whatever they think? There must be a local legend about it."

Uriah Epply carefully put his tools on the floor, found a pack of cigarettes in his leather jacket pocket, took one out and lighted it. Then he turned to face me.

"You never heard?" he asked.

I wanted to kick him in the mouth and stamp him into insensibility. What in the hell did he suppose I was asking for, if I'd heard?

"No," I said with amazing calm. "No. I've never heard."

"That so?" Uriah Epply marvelled, his round little face wrinkled in mild astonishment. "That's really funny. The architect fella knew. I mean, he knew before he even bought the place

and started remodeling it. He called it all a lot of guff and nonsense, though."

Uriah Epply's pause prompted me to ask despairingly:

"He called what a lot of guff and nonsense?"

"The story about the house," said Epply.

"Oh," I said chokingly. "Oh, I see. Well what is the story about the house?"

If my voice rose on the last three words Epply didn't show any sign of noticing it. He took a reflective drag from his cigarette and smiled.

"I guess you never heard of the Baggat boys, eh?" he said.

"No," I told him. "I never heard of the Baggat boys. What do they have to do with the story?"

Pulling teeth was like picking posies compared to the job of getting information out of this New England electrician. He shook his head wonderingly.

"Most folks around these parts know the history of the Baggat boys from Ebenezer to Zekial," he observed wonderingly. "Sure seems funny you don't know it."

"Maybe," I said carefully, "I haven't been around these parts long enough. And maybe you'll oblige by telling me who in the name of blazes the Baggat boys are."

"Was," corrected Uriah Epply mildly.

"All right," I conceded, "who was they—I mean, were?"

"Ever hear of the James boys?" Epply asked by way of an answer.

"Frank and Jesse?" I asked.

"That's right," said Uriah Epply. "They was a little better known, though than the Baggat boys was."

"Oh," I said, considerably less irritated now that we seemed to be making a *little* sense. "The Baggat boys were notorious bandits around these

parts, eh?"

"Wasn't hardly a bank in all New England they didn't knock over," said Uriah Epply with a touch of local pride in his voice.

"I see. How long ago was that era?"

"Same era as when the James boys was gunning up the wild and woolly west," Epply said. "Come to think, could be why the Baggat boys didn't become better known. Come to think, the James boys probably took all the publicity themselves."

"I see," I told him. "Sounds reasonable. Now tell me how the Baggat boys fit into the legend around this remodeled old New England farmhouse."

OF COURSE, Uriah Epply didn't answer my question directly.

"There was two of the Baggat boys," he said. "They was blood brothers. One was Bob Baggat; the other was Hiram Baggat. Bob was the smartest of the two, Hi was the quickest with a gun."

Epply paused and half closed his eyes, as though visualizing Bob Baggat being bright and Hiram Baggat being bloodthirsty. He sighed, opened his eyes again, dropped his cigarette to the floor and crushed it out methodically with his foot.

"How," I said thinly, "do the Baggat boys figure into the superstition around this house?"

Uriah Epply gave me a look of mild surprise.

"Superstition, you say?"

I was beginning to show my irritation and impatience.

"Of course," I snapped. "What else?"

Uriah Epply shrugged his shoulders, raised his eyebrows.

"Don't rightly know what else," he said. "Always looked on it as fact, myself. After all, that's what it is—fact."

"What's fact?"

"The story," said Epply imperturbably. "The whole thing is fact. In history books, old newspapers, right in the Chatam Library you can see the newspaper clippings about the Baggat boys, Bob and Hi. Can't call historic fact like that superstition."

"Please," I begged quietly, "tell me the story. Tell me how they fit into the superst—ah—attitude locally taken about this house."

Uriah Epply grinned.

"Glad to," he said. "Didn't know you'd be interested. Funny thing no one else ain't told you by now. Abner Land, of course, now he wouldn't be likely to tell you. Not and being the real estate man who was trying to rent this house ever since the architect last summer took out and run—"

I cut him off.

"The story," I said hoarsely. "Remember?"

"Sure," acknowledged Epply. "These Baggat boys, like I was telling you, or trying to tell you, was desperadoes—just like Frank and Jesse James was. They lived wild and high and handsome and kept the whole darned countryside in these parts terrorized. Night after night they stuck up bank after bank. High flying, hell-riding devils they was. Trains, too; stuck up many a train and robbed the mail of the U. S. government no less. Oh, my yes. They was plenty poisonous."

I didn't bother to interrupt again in an effort to get him to the point of the story. There was no sense in that. All I could do was let him ramble. I knew that he'd reach it eventually.

"Well, these Baggat boys, brothers, like I told you," Epply continued, "got away with murder and robbery and Lord knows what all for darned near three, four years. And the more they robbed and shot and the likes, the more

people around these parts got madder and madder. But trouble was, as the people got madder and madder, the Baggats got more and more cocky, understand? See how it was?"

I said that I could understand how that would be logical.

"Finally the people round these parts has had just too much from them Baggat boys. They appeal to the governor. Yes sir, right to the governor of this fair state himself. They tell him they want the state militia called out and put on the trail of these here Baggat boys."

EPPLY paused to search through his leather jacket for another cigarette. He found one after a minute, put it in his mouth, and lighted it. He had to wait until the end was burning to suit him before he went on.

"Well, the Baggat boys heard that the governor was sending out the state militia against them, and they sent out a bunch of cocksure challenges to all the villages, defying the troops to get 'em. The Baggat boys was like that, you understand, cocky as hell and proud as twin devils. They was up in the hills a few miles from here, right at the foot of the Henner Mountain, in fact, hiding out. And to show the state troops what they thought of them, they planned to stage a bang-bang bank robbery right under their noses. You see, there was a troop of state militia sent to Chatam, first off."

I was less impatient now, and beginning to be actually concerned with the details of the Baggat boy's and their escapades. I nodded eagerly for Epply to get on with his narration.

But now that the rotund little electrician had been winding me around his little finger, he surprisingly enough didn't take advantage of the situation. He got right on with it.

"The entire town of Chatam was up in arms to think that the Baggat boys picked out their little village to insult that way," Uriah Epply said. "And don't think that the state militia on guard in the village wasn't burned up, either."

"The Baggat brothers sent out notice that they were going to pull a hold-up of the village bank in Chatam?" I asked in astonishment.

"Nothing less," Uriah Epply said. "Sent the notice to the mayor of Chatam himself. Happened that the mayor was also president of the little bank and a colonel in the state militia."

"Good lord," I marveled. "What happened then?"

"The mayor and the entire village, as well as the militia, went plumb crazy mad. They sat up night and day in shifts, all carrying guns and vowing to fill the first sign of anybody looking like a Baggat boy with lead. You see, the Baggat brothers even told the mayor that they was gonna rob the bank within a certain two-week period, starting that very day."

I whistled my admiration at the audacity.

"And when did they try it?" I asked. "Or did they?"

"Try it?" Uriah Epply seemed surprised and a little indignant. "Try it? They did it! And they walked off with thirty thousand dollars right out of town."

"But——" I began.

"Course the entire town and all the state militia was right on their heels," Epply said. "Shooting and hollering and chasing the Baggat boys to beat hell. Understand there wasn't more than couple hundred yards between the Baggat boys's horses' heels and the guns of the pursuing citizenry."

"A few hundred yards?" I gasped.

"Well, maybe half a mile, maybe a

mile. No more than that," Uriah Ep-
ply amended.

"Did they shake loose from their
pursuers?" I asked.

"Nope. Couldn't quite. They had to
change their plans when Bob Baggat's
horse was hit. They had to take to
hiding quick, and they picked out this
here old farmhouse."

I LOOKED wordlessly around the
cellar, thrilling at the thought that
the Baggat boys might possibly have
held whispered conferences in the very
corner in which I sat.

"Did the townspeople and the militia
trace them to here?" I asked.

"Course," said Ep-
ply. "Trail was
easy to follow. The posse after 'em
tracked 'em here in less than three
hours after they robbed the bank."

"What about the people who were
living in the farmhouse here at the
time?" I demanded.

"Baggat boys let 'em loose without
killing any," Ep-
ply said, "when they
saw that the posse had caught up with
'em and was surrounding this here
house."

"Gallant gesture," I said.

"Maybe. Maybe they didn't want
'em in the way when the shooting
started, interfering with their aim."

"Then the Baggat brothers decided
to hold the fort and shoot it out with
the posse?" I demanded.

"Course. They was proud. The posse
was ringed ten men deep all around
the farmhouse. Mouse couldn't sneak
thorough in the black of night, without
brushing a human's shoe. The Baggats
knew all this, but they was damned if
they'd face the humiliation of getting
captured alive."

"Ooooff!" I grunted. "What custom-
ers they must have been."

Uriah Ep-
ply nodded proudly.

"Sure was. When the posse had the

place completely encircled, ten deep
like I said, the mayor—who was also
a militia colonel—snaked forward on
his belly into the clearing edge near
the house and hollered for them to
surrender. Bob Baggat shot his hat
clean off his head, by way of answer-
ing."

I nodded in pop-eyed wonder.

"Mayor went back to his posse line
and told the boys to open fire at will,"
Ep-
ply continued. "My grandpappy—
he died when I was just a youngster—
used to tell me about it. He was one
of the villagers in the posse. Well, when
the mayor gave his order, you never
heard the like of noise that started.

Bang, bang, bang, bang—it was ter-
rible. Most likely three hundred bullets
a minute pouring into that farmhouse
on the Baggat boys."

"And that did them in very shortly,
I suppose," I said.

Uriah Ep-
ply looked indignant.

"Did not," he snorted. "Baggat boys
killed eleven men in the posse in less'n
forty minutes of that one-sided ex-
change. The posse kept the house just
as completely encircled, but had to fall
back out of range."

"It's almost incredible," I said.

"'Tis," said Ep-
ply, "but you'll find it
in the library down to Chatam any
time you want to look. State history
has it, too."

"Go ahead," I begged him. "How
did it wind up?"

Uriah Ep-
ply smiled curiously.

"Hard to say that, completely. I'll
explain. The siege lasted six days."

"Six days?" I broke in.

"And one night," added Ep-
ply. "Yes-
siree. That's how long it lasted. Posse
tried to rush the farmhouse ten times
in all. Lost two dozen men in killed and
wounded trying. They knew the Baggat
boys was out of food and water and
wasn't sleeping scarce a wink, so they

just waited them out after the last try at rushing the place. Safer that way."

"How'd they know when the Baggat boys would be broken?" I asked.

"Every so often they'd let loose with a few hundred bullets into the house and the Baggat boys allus answered fire. They figgered that when they finally let loose with a volley and didn't get any answer, the Baggat boys would be half a day away from dead."

"How did the Baggat brothers hold out on ammunition supply?" I asked.

"THEY'D picked up some they'd had buried away in a cache nearby. Picked it up in running from the bank, before they made this here farmhouse. They had plenty to stand off a seige."

"And so they Baggat boys didn't answer fire on the sixth day, eh?" I asked.

"The afternoon of the sixth day," Epply specified. "The posse was hopeful, then, and volleyed again around nightfall. The Baggat boys still didn't return the fire. Well, then they rushed the farmhouse, the first line of the posse did, that is. The rest, nine deep, then, kept the ring and waited, just in case. They saw to it that it would be impossible for the Baggat boys to get through the ring, even though they might slip through the front ring rushing the house. Mouse couldn't get through without being seen."

"And the posse found the Baggat boys dead of starvation or bullets, eh?"

Uriah Epply paused to take a deep, contemplative drag from his cigarette. He looked at me and grinned strangely.

"You're wrong," he said. "They didn't find the Baggat boys at all. Not a trace of them."

"Is that right?" I began. Then, as the realization of what Epply had said suddenly dawned on me, I blurted:

"What?"

"That's right. They didn't find a trace," said the rotund little narrator. "They found empty food larders, empty water jugs, empty shells, and a house that was in ribbons with bullet holes everywhere. You couldn't put a quarter on the floors or walls or even the ceiling without touching a bullet hole. But the Baggat boys just wasn't present."

"But that's impossible!" I bleated.

Epply nodded agreeably.

"Sure it was impossible. They couldn't have skipped out at any time during the seige. Like I said, an ant would have been noticed if he tried to get through the ten deep ring around this here farmhouse. Was just impossible, that's all. Impossible."

"Then they must have been here in the farmhouse," I protested. "In the attic, or down here in the cellar."

"Weren't nowhere in the farmhouse. Every place and nook and board and cranny remaining of this here farmhouse was searched up and down and high and wide. One militia trooper even looked under the rugs on the floor. But the Baggat boys just wasn't to be found."

"But where did they go?" I demanded.

"From the facts of the case, real history, mind you, seems like they didn't go anywhere," Uriah Epply said. "They musta stayed right in this here old farmhouse."

"But that's ridiculous," I protested. "If they'd been in this farmhouse, they'd have been found. Or, at any rate, their bodies would have. It's preposterous to suppose otherwise. Undoubtedly they escaped, through some miracle, and took to the hills. That's the only explanation."

"There's another," said Epply, "that's been considered seriously by folks in Chatam ever since."

"And what's that?"

"That they're still here," said Epply, "even now."

"Absurd," I snorted. But in spite of my opinion and the strength with which I held it, a tiny sliver of a chill jabbed into my spine.

"If you can believe they walked right through a wall of human flesh to freedom," Uriah Epply said calmly, "it isn't a great deal more silly to believe that they're still here in this house, and that they was in this house when the posse searched it, only wasn't seen."

My rotund little New Englander turned around then and began tinkering once more with the electric unit box. It was obviously a sign that the discussion, as far as he was concerned, was ended.

I got up from my barrel and walked over to the stairs.

"It's ridiculous," I said.

Uriah Epply didn't bother answering. I clumped disgustedly up the stairs and into the kitchen. . . .

THE DINNER SERVED by Mrs. Spingler that evening was a culinary heaven. It was amazing to think that such a sour old witch could be such an incredibly good cook, and I mentally noted this variance in her outward and utilitarian selves for discussion sometime with a psychiatrist.

The dinner was so delicious that it even worked noticeable improvement on Lynn's disposition.

For that feat alone I would have happily trebled Martha Spingler's wages, had I been able to afford to.

Lynn used much of her improved attitude in discussion of the following day's visit from her family. I chimed in as amiably as I could, keeping away from any angles that might become sparks for an argument, and the meal was finished with a remarkable degree

of good feeling.

We sat in the living room, smoking and talking and laughing over reminiscences for several hours after dinner, and Lynn went upstairs and came down again with a fifth of Scotch she had tucked away in one of the steamer trunks.

We opened the bottle and had a few drinks, and a couple of hours after that I almost slipped and told Lynn the silly legend around the history of our new home. But I managed to cover up all right, and kept clear of anything that might trip me into it again.

About ten o'clock Mrs. Spingler—who had been busy at some damned self-made chore in the kitchen—came into the living room to announce that she was going upstairs to her room for some sleep, and inquire about the time we wanted our breakfast.

Lynn told her that we'd probably sleep a little late, and to have our morning meal on the griddle about ten thirty or a quarter to eleven. Mrs. Spingler showed obvious disapproval of such a wastrel's breakfast hour, and went upstairs muttering things about city people.

I turned on the radio and got some news, and about fifteen minutes later Lynn yawned and announced that she was all in.

"It's been a long day for both of us," I agreed. "I'll turn in now, too."

Lynn started upstairs and told me to turn out the lights in the living room. I did so, happily, realizing that although our battle was not yet done, nor won, Lynn was at least willing to carry along for a bit in the status of a friendly enough truce.

I heard Lynn's sharp exclamation of alarm when I was halfway up the stairs. She had reached the bedroom a minute ahead of me.

"Tom!" she cried, then. "Tom!"

I ran up the rest of the stairs and burst into the bedroom to find her staring in horror at the bed. My heart was in my mouth, and I didn't dare think of what I was going to see.

"What's wrong, baby? What's the matter?" I gasped.

"Look at the bed, Tom," she gasped strickenly. "The fools forgot to get sheets. It's made up without sheets and we'll have to sleep between blankets!"

The water left my knees and my heart came back to its normal position in my chest.

"Whew!" I gasped. "You had me worrier for a minute, baby."

Lynn looked at me with dismay.

"But this is terrible, Tom," she wailed.

"We'll just have to make the best of it," I told her. "I can drive into the village first thing in the morning and get enough bedsheets to supply all of India for a thousand years."

Which was all we could do—make the best of it. And Lynn although she admitted as much, was right back into her stony mood of that afternoon. The spell of Mrs. Spingler's cooking, the pleasant evening of chatter we'd had, everything that had been thawing her out, was a thing of the past again. The truce was off.

I was awake long after Lynn's even breathing told me she was off in dreamland. Awake and staring at the ceiling, thinking about the big bad Baggat boys and a number of other things.

Of course, I knew that the double-time beat on my imagination was due merely to the darkened room and the wind sighing through the trees in the moonless night outside. But even so, I gave much consideration to the mysterious rummaging that had been done on my suitcases, and the attic noises that Lynn had heard coming down through the chimney and out the fire-

place. Noises that she thought had been made by me. Noises that were made in a room which was, or should have been, deserted.

I went to sleep determining to have a look in the attic the following morning, first thing. Went to sleep as the rain started to patter down against the window pane, and the thunder crackled in the distant hills. . . .

L YNN woke me up. I heard the rain beating monotonously against the window pane and the guttural growlings of thunder as I blinked away the sleep and stared around the gloomy grayness of the room.

"What time is it?" I demanded.

"Nine o'clock," Lynn said.

"Morning or noon?" I gaggled quite unfunnyly.

"Look at that storm outside," Lynn groaned.

"I can hear it and imagine what it's like by now," I said. "It was starting off about the time I fell asleep last night. Evidently it's been hard at it ever since."

"The driveway to Kingston Road is a swamp if it's all like the stretch outside the house," Lynn said. "What on earth will Father and Mother and Katherine and Walter do?"

"Get a little wet, I suppose," I said, which turned out to be the very thing I shouldn't have said. Lynn glared at me.

"You wouldn't *care*," she snapped.

"Of course I would," I said soothingly, hastily. "Only there doesn't seem to be anything I could do about it, does there?"

"Wake up Mrs. Spingler," said Lynn by way of answer to that. "And tell her to make us some breakfast. I'm starved."

A jagged bolt of lightning split the sky at that instant, as thunder crashed.

It made me think of Mrs. Spingler's probable reaction toward anyone with gall enough to rouse her.

"No, thanks," I said. "You wake her. I'll munch soda crackers rather than face that old girl."

Lynn gave me a look that was half vicious lion and half angry wife.

"You craven coward!" she said.

She climbed out of bed and struggled into a quilted housecoat.

"I could starve to death in this God-forsaken forest, for all you care."

"It's not a forest," I began.

A brisk rapping on the door interrupted my protestations.

Before I could yell, "Come in," the door was pushed open and the cause for our quarrel stuck her unlovely face into the room.

"I heard your voices," said Mrs. Spingler, "and I wanted to know if you'd like me to fix breakfast now."

Lynn told her to do so by all means, and that we'd be right down to it. Mrs. Spingler took her head out of the door and closed it. Lynn gave a wordless, contemptuous look that told me exactly what she thought of the craven cowardice that had made me flinch at the thought of asking such an obviously willing cook to make breakfast.

I ignored the glance, but I couldn't help ruminating on the fact that Mrs. Spingler had, indeed, seemed considerably less dour this morning than she had last night. In fact, she'd practically had a merry gleam in her rheumy eye when she'd asked if we wanted breakfast.

I decided the only explanation for her cheerfulness was the storm. It was probably all deeply psychological, and prompted by the fact that storms made normal, happy people miserable and therefore brought cheery good will into the hearts of Salem witches and Mrs. Spinglers.

LYNN and I arrived at the breakfast table in gloomy, mutually appreciated silence.

The breakfast was superb, positively royal. If you can imagine a banquet being held for a breakfast rather than dinner, you'll have some idea of the repast Mrs. Spingler set for us.

Lynn ate ravenously, and I didn't exactly ignore the fare myself. Mrs. Spingler, cheery as a lark, buzzed back and forth from kitchen to dining-room like a May Queen dashing around the pole.

What few words Lynn and I exchanged were sadistically savage.

"You'll have to make several trips into town, today," Lynn reminded me. "Through the storm."

"Why several?" I asked innocently enough. "I can pick up everything in one trip."

"There'll probably be something I'll forget," Lynn said. And from the way she said it, I knew that the statement was a promise *and* a threat.

"I'll wait until you remember what you're planning to forget," I said, trying to ease the strain.

"Bedsheets," said Lynn, "will be necessary for each of the bedrooms. Four pairs of sheets for each. Sleeping beneath those scratchy blankets last night was one of the most loathsome experiences I have ever had."

"Mrs. Spingler's room was also minus sheets," I said. "She doesn't seem to have minded it a bit."

"She'd undoubtedly prefer a good stiff haircloth sleeping bag," Lynn said, "placed on a plank."

Lynn was in a lovely mood. She was hating everybody. I tried to change the topic to someone she couldn't hate.

"The storm might delay your family a few hours," I said. "Particularly if the roads flood over."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Lynn snapped.

"Now, listen . . ." I began.

Lynn cut me off, her voice growing more angry with each word.

"Oh, yes you would. You'd relish that; Thomas Kelvin. You'd sit there warm and dry in front of the fire and rub your hands over it. I know you would. I can tell just the way you made that crack!"

"My God!" I protested, forgetting my placating role momentarily. "I didn't make anything like a crack. All I said was——"

"I heard what you said," Lynn cried, rising indignantly from the table. "Don't try to turn the words around to get out of it. And the smirk you had on your face when you made that crack was worse than the crack itself!"

I sighed, and picked at some sausage with my fork.

"It couldn't have been," I told her. "It just couldn't have been worse than my saying that I hoped your entire family was caught in a road flood and drowned like pack rats."

Lynn reached for the left-over pancakes on the platter before I had wind of her intention. They caught me flush on the side of my unshaven chin, and a thin trickle of syrup rolled down my neck as she stamped out of the dining-room and upstairs.

Mrs. Spingler appeared at the door between kitchen and dining-room a split second later. She was beaming.

"It's quite a storm we're having, Mr. Kelvin, isn't it?"

I picked the remains of Lynn's missile from my face and stood up with as much dignity as I could muster.

"Mrs. Spingler," I said with acid politeness, "may I call you Martha?"

LYNN kept to her room for an hour or so, while I panthered around the living room and listened to the storm

play hell with the radio reception.

It was almost eleven o'clock when Lynn came downstairs. The expression she wore was the one she'd use on a ticket-taker in a depot—cold, impersonal, and utterly emotionless.

"Isn't it about time you started for the village?" she asked. "I would prefer to have everything in order when my family arrives."

The tone she used implied that she'd like to have everything in order as much as it could possibly be so in such a hole and under such exceedingly trying circumstances.

I sighed inwardly, and pushed a few remarks I'd been rehearsing off my tongue. It was going to be more important to placate Lynn while her family was present than at any other time in the battle. To get her too sore while they were around would just be playing into their hands, and I was determined not to do that.

Swallowing my pride wasn't too hard, when I made a mental check to pay Lynn back later for those pancakes.

"Okay, baby," I said. "I'll run upstairs and shave and get into an unpressed suit. I'll be into the village and back in plenty of time before they arrive. You got a list of what you want?"

Lynn handed me a list, and I stuffed it into the pocket of my bathrobe, essayed a forgiving we'll-be-friends smile, and started upstairs.

I was in the process of changing clothes when I remembered my resolve of the previous night to have a look in the attic. In the gloomy light of morning it didn't seem nearly so important.

"What the devil," I told myself, "I'll let it go until later in the afternoon. The attic might be a good place to be while Lynn's family is here."

I slipped into a gabardine topcoat and stuck my hand into the pocket won-

dering if I'd left the keys to the car there. The keys were there, plus a folded sheet of coarse paper.

Examination of the folded paper showed it to be the sort that butchers use, or *used* to use, to wrap up meats. Brown and, as I said before, thick and coarse.

Thinking it might be a receipt I picked up unthinkingly in Chatam's general store, I unfolded it casually.

It wasn't a receipt. It was a note.

The note was written in a loose, scrawling, childish hand, with a thick, smeary black substance that seemed to be charcoal. It was brief and to the point:

This is noe plase fer a stranger. This is yewre ferst warning. Take heed uv it.

It was unsigned.

I reread the note several times, jaw foolishly agape. And then I thought of the messed-up luggage and the noises in the attic and realized I had now another incident to ponder.

I stuffed the note back into my pocket and went downstairs. Lynn wasn't in the living room, and I heard her talking to Mrs. Spingler out in the kitchen.

When I went out there, Mrs. Spingler smiled in what she probably believed to be bright domestic cheeriness and handed me a small piece of paper.

"The missus says she waunts turkey at dinner tonight," said the cook. "And I made out a list of some of the things I've planned to have with it."

I took the list and glanced at it with more than idle curiosity. Mrs. Spingler had written it in a fine, precise, schoolmarmish hand. There was nothing loose or scrawly or illiterate about it, and the amateur Sherlock in me was convinced that she hadn't written the message I'd found in my pocket.

"Don't forget anything," Lynn said.

I promised I wouldn't, and wondered

if she had. Then I left by the back way, through the kitchen, and went around to the garage, slogging through mud and merciless rain.

After five minutes spent in cursing the awkward mechanism necessary to endure in order to put the top of the convertible up, I was under way.

THE gravel roadway leading to Kingston Road was heavily flooded, but I managed to get through it without portaging the roadster across the streams on my back.

The Kingston Road proved equally damp but considerably less difficult, and I was able to make Chatam in the somewhat snailish time of forty minutes.

I picked up the stuff on the lists given me by Lynn and Mrs. Spingler without too much difficulty, and, thoroughly soaked, climbed back behind the wheel almost an hour later and started back for the place.

The rain had now settled down to a sloshing monotony minus the previous thunder and lightning, and there didn't seem to be any indication that it would clear up for some time.

There was more water going back than coming, of course, and the driving was even a little tougher than before. It was a matter of forty-five minutes before I finally turned off onto the flooded gravel roadway leading to our place.

I managed to cover several hundred yards before I ran into trouble at the first turn. The trouble was in the form of a washout which had turned the roadway at that point into a three-foot-deep stream.

Maybe I made my mistake in gunning the motor and trying to smash straight through it. At any rate, the points in the motor must have gotten a thorough soaking as I splashed head-on into it, for the motor coughed and

stopped right in the middle of the wash-out.

I sat there motionless, throwing together a dictionary of improper names as I stared through the windshield into the downpour and wondered what in the hell I was going to do.

Futilely, a few moments later, I tried to start the motor again. It wasn't having any, thank you, and didn't even bother to cough apologetically.

I looked through the side windows and ascertained that I was squarely in the middle of a miniature lake. Getting out would be like stepping into a children's wading pool.

Then I thought of the stuff I had piled up in the back. It wasn't so much that I couldn't carry it the additional mile up to the house in one load, but at the same time, it wasn't the sort of stuff, for the most part, that could be safely lugged one mile through a deluge of rain and mud.

I looked at the clock on the dashboard.

It was twenty minutes after one.

"Lynn's family is probably already entrenched in the living room," I muttered, "warming themselves in the snug dry comfort of the fireplace."

I pushed that pleasant probability from my mind, since it served only to make me more dismal than warranted even by my present plight.

I found a slightly dampened cigarette and lighted it with the third soggy match from a pack in my pocket. I was smoking resignedly and staring dourly at nothing when I suddenly remembered the big tarpaulin in the rumble seat.

That was a solution.

I could get out the tarp, bring it around to the front and pile practically all the packages into it, using it like a huge knapsack. Carrying it that way, like a grotesque Santa with an enor-

mous sack, I could get the stuff up to the house without any of it suffering from the elements.

I was especially pleased with my resourcefulness, even when I opened the door and stepped out of the car into three feet of cold rain water.

THE scheme proved practicable, and inside of another ten minutes I was drenched to the skin, but had managed to collect all the packages into the tarpaulin and sling the load over my shoulder.

I left the car in the center of the washed-out roadway and started for the house. The rain was still pouring buckets, and the footing underneath made me think of swampland and quicksand, but it really didn't matter. I was as soaked as any human being could be before I'd even started.

It took me about fifteen minutes to get to the house, and when Lynn opened the front door to see my bedraggled, bemuddled and besoaked condition she almost fainted.

"Tom," she gasped. "What's happened, Tom? Did you have an accident? Have you been hurt?"

I shoved the big tarpaulin knapsack through the door ahead of me, and the packages spilled across the hallway as it came open. Then I stepped inside and Lynn closed the door behind me.

I told her briefly what had happened, and added:

"Your folks safe and dry in our midst?"

Lynn shook her head.

"No. I'm terribly worried. They haven't arrived yet. You'd think they'd telephone if anything had happened to delay them."

"They're all right, Lynn," I assured her. "It's just very slow going on the roads today, even the smoothest highways."

Lynn went into the living room, and I clumped puddles up the stairs to the bedroom. I changed completely, getting in a hot shower between costumes. I came downstairs, then, feeling very hardy and very virtuous for having braved the storm and rain—and extremely happy that I was no longer doing so. Lynn was smoking a cigarette nervously and pacing back and forth between the fireplace and the big front window that looked out on the rain-swept roadway.

"Don't worry yourself into a state, baby," I said. "They'll be all right. Maybe they stopped off to pick up some water wings."

Lynn glared at me, but didn't say anything. I went into the hallway and saw that Mrs. Spingler, or Lynn, had removed the packages I'd left there.

"Where's the liquor I brought?" I yelled out to Lynn.

She didn't answer and I went back into the kitchen and saw Mrs. Spingler putting away a lot of the stuff I'd gotten. The half case of Scotch was in the corner under the sink.

"I'll pack this away in the cabinet in the living room," I told the cook.

Lynn was sitting in a chair by the big window when I brought the bottles into the living room and began to store them in the cabinet bar there.

"Like a drink, baby?"

She shook her head. I opened the bottle that we had left from the previous night, found a glass, and poured myself a stiff, warming hooker.

I sighed as I sank into an easy chair near the fire, tumbler full of Scotch in my hand.

Lynn got up again, lighted a cigarette, and began pacing restlessly back and forth. I was tempted to bring up the old saw about a watched kettle never boiling, then thought better of it.

By the time I'd poured myself a

second drink, Lynn was out in the kitchen occupying her mind in over-seeing Mrs. Spingler's preparations for dinner.

I got up and turned on the radio, searching for a news broadcast. I had found one, and was starting back to my chair, when I glanced casually out the big front window and saw Lynn's family.

THEY were slogging up the gravel roadway in the deluging rain, on foot, and I have never seen four more miserable spectacles than the four of them presented.

Oliver Jerem, Lynn's dad, led the procession. He was a short, paunchy, red-faced white-haired man who looked like a cartoon of a successful business tycoon. At the moment he carried a pair of enormous suitcases, one in either hand, and was swathed Indian-fashion in an automobile robe. His once jaunty Homburg was a sodden droop of fine felt over his ears, and his pin-striped trousers were caked to the knees with mud.

Second in the line of approaching guests was Lynn's mother. She was a small, thin woman who looked at the moment like a thoroughly irate wet hen. For shelter from the deluge she held some soaked, pulpy newspapers over the drooping feather of a once jaunty hat.

Katherine—Lynn's tall, thin, pseudo-blase and extremely neurotic sister—brought up the rear with her husband, Walter Lurgar.

Walter was—generally—the perfect model of a tailor's dummy. The impeccable suit he inevitably wore was invariably "gentleman's attire" with the one exception that they were a little too sharply tailored, a trifle too keenly pressed. The suit, topcoat and natty fedora he now wore might once have suited his tastes. Now they'd be sneered

at by a scarecrow.

I stood there a moment at the window, grinning from ear to ear, and then I dashed into the kitchen and announced their approach to Lynn.

She looked at me in glee that swiftly faded into horror.

"Did you say they're afoot?" she demanded aghast.

I nodded. "Car must have broken down on them, or had the same thing happen to it that happened to mine."

Lynn went into action then.

"What are you standing around uselessly for, Thomas Kelvin?" she demanded. "You said yourself that they've their luggage with them, and in that terrible downpour I don't see how they can——"

I cut her off.

"Your father is carrying both suitcases," I said. "And he seems to be getting along just fine with them. If he needs extra help, there's always Walter, who isn't carrying anything but a miserable scowl at the moment."

Lynn glared at me and dashed into the living room and over to the window. She stared out at her family's procession for half a minute, then turned and bolted for the hallway. I went over to the window and looked out. The Jerems and the Lurgars had made it to the walk, by now, and were slogging up to the door.

I took a deep breath and hid my grin under an anxious, sympathetic expression. Then I followed Lynn into the hallway.

SHE had the door open, and rain spray was sifting in through the opening. I stood behind her and watched the party advance grimly up to the front stoop.

"Daddy!" Lynn cried. "Mother!"

And then, before I could stop her, she made a dash out across the stoop

and threw her arms around Oliver Jerem.

"Oh, you poor, poor dears!" she exclaimed. "You're all drenched to the skin!"

Oliver Jerem muttered something that sounded like a growling agreement and enlargement on that statement. Mrs. Jerem broke into a shrill cry of anguished greeting, and I could see Walter Lurgar exchanging under-the-breath curses with Katherine, his wife and Lynn's sister.

Then I stepped back from the door and the inundated little caravan puddled into the hallway.

"Hello, folks," I greeted them, "glad to have you with us."

"Thomas," grunted Oliver Jerem, giving me a frosty glare, "is that your triple damned thirty blanked jib-jab convertible down on that washed-out stretch of the road?"

I nodded.

"Same thing must have happened to both of us, eh, Mr. Jerem?"

The head of the Jerem household gave me a withering and piercing stare.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded.

"Motors konking out, thanks to the splash of the miniature rivers that thwarted us," I amplified.

"We were forced to walk a mile to this place because *your* machine is still blocking the road and it is quite impossible, what with the flood and the storm, to pass by it. Nothing happened to the motor of my limousine. It is still in excellent condition and would have delivered us to the door if it hadn't been for that—that—blasted convertible collegian's car of yours!" he thundered.

Lynn swung on me then.

"You deliberately left our car in the middle of a flooded road, blocking the way to our house a mile off?" she gasped angrily.

"I didn't do anything of the sort"; I said protestingly, "not deliberately, at any rate. My car stalled in the middle of that minor river out there. How in the blazes was I to move it? Besides, I thought your family had already arrived. After all, they were supposed to be here around noon. How was I to know that they'd be blocked off in a stor——"

Lynn's mother cut me off.

"Thomas," she said with mild, martyred reproof, "you don't stop to think. That's the only trouble with you."

I shut my eyes tightly and counted half-way to ten. Then I sighed, opening them.

"You people are drenched" I said. "The best thing to do is get right upstairs to the guest rooms and change. I'll mix some drinks and have them ready when you come down."

There was much muttering, much stamping around, much solicitous murmuring from Lynn about the general condition of the little party. But eventually, they started upstairs and I was left alone in the living room.

Grimly, tight-lipped, I set about mixing some hot toddies. This involved going out into the kitchen and ordering Mrs. Spingler to cease her turkey plucking long enough to put a pot of hot water on to boil.

Then I went back into the living room and measured out good stiff portions for all of them, and an even stiffer dose for myself.

I looked at the toddy mix I had started off for yours truly, then decided to fix another one, and downed that one straight. I needed it. Things had started off with just the sort of a bang I'd been trying to avoid.

LYNN came down a little later. She was strictly grim and tight-lipped. She stood in the archway of the living

room a moment, watching me pour out another measure of whiskey for myself.

"Well," she said at last, "you most certainly made things hideously difficult from the very beginning."

I remembered, with difficulty, that this would be no time to return Lynn's hostile attitude. There was, unfortunately, a bond of mutual animosity already existing between Lynn and her folks. Anything I did to further it would be contributing to the downfall of Thomas Kelvin Inc. So I looked a little hurt, and a trifle on the apologetic side, and said:

"It wasn't intentional, Lynn, I thought they were already here. And in addition to that, I had no idea that the convertible breaking down in the place it did would block off the road. I guess I just forgot about the fact that the flooded road made it impossible to bypass the car. Under ordinary conditions there would have been plenty of room for another car to use for passage. At any rate. I'm awfully sorry that your family was put to such an inconvenience."

One thing about Lynn, soft talk such as that was generally fairly well received. That is, she knew that she couldn't carry on a strictly knock-down-and-drag-out quarrel alone, especially when the party of the second part is as unwilling as I was at the moment, and as apparently willing to be friends.

Lynn sighed.

"Oh, Tom, everything out here has been so terribly messed up. It's not at all like Manhattan. Everything was so much more simple then."

I counted half-way to ten, realizing that the very presence of her family in the place had started it all out again.

"Now, Lynn," I argued amiably, "it's not fair to say that so soon. We've scarcely been here twenty-four hours."

"But everything——" Lynn began.

"Not everything," I protested calmly. "We have a wonderful cook. The food has been excellent. The climate isn't always like it is today. I understand, from conversations I had with a few of the villagers, that this sort of storm comes once or twice a year at the most."

Lynn didn't say anything to this. She lighted a cigarette and flopped wearily down on the couch. I figured her silence was—at least in this instance—better than an answer. I went on rapidly, using these last available minutes alone to counteract the seeds that her family would undoubtedly begin sowing in another few minutes.

"It was fun last night, wasn't it, Lynn?" I asked. "Just sitting around the living room, talking and having a few drinks and keeping warm by the fireplace."

I paused, letting the nostalgic note sink in. Lynn still didn't say anything, but she looked considerably less antagonistic about it all.

"There's a lot to this country life, baby," I went on. "We have even started to draw the dividends on it. And besides, it's not as if we were completely away from everything. There'll be week-ends we can spend now and then in Manhattan. And, with a cook and maid, all modern conveniences, a beautifully modernized little place like this—it's not as if we're out here roughing it. What did we have in New York that we won't have here?"

Lynn took a thoughtful drag from her cigarette, looked up with a faint smile, and said:

"Subways."

Which wasn't a bad reaction. At least she was able to kid about it. I felt a slight glow of pride, and the situation seemed not nearly so dark as it had been a few minutes ago.

"That water ought to be boiling by

now," I said. "And your folks'll be down wanting a nice hot, bracing drink."

I STARTED out for the kitchen, and Lynn, much to my surprise, rose, following me.

She whipped up the rest of the toddy mix in the kitchen while I turned off the gas under the boiling water and managed that department.

We brought the proper ingredients back into the living room, just like a husband and wife who had nothing in the world to be at odds about. And I put the toddy mugs on a tray while Lynn added the final touches to the servings.

I got the idea, at that point, of squirting an extra little bang of booze into each toddy. And that was when I opened the bottom doors of the liquor cabinet bar and saw that three bottles of whisky—there had been seven but ten minutes before, were all that remained in view.

I started to give cry to the discovery and suddenly shut up.

Four bottles out of seven lifted right out from under our very noses! What in the hell went?

I grabbed one of the bottles and snapped the doors shut.

"I don't think I put quite enough in each of those for a starter." I said to Lynn, making automatic conversation while my mind tore frantically at the edges of the new mystery. "Here—I'll add a little to those glasses."

Lynn looked at me frowningly.

"Is something wrong, Tom?" she asked. "You have the most peculiar expression on your face."

"Have I?" I smiled as best I could. "That's odd. What could possibly be wrong?"

We heard the voices of Lynn's father and mother and her sister and husband

coming along the second floor landing, then, and realized that they were on the way down.

I was glad, for a change, to have them barge in. Lynn might have gotten more inquisitive about my peculiar reaction to the disappearance of the four bottles of booze—about which she knew nothing at present.

By the time our guests had each had a drink and were ready for another, the toddies had warmed up both the atmosphere and the conversation.

Oliver Jerem, Lynn's dad and my ex-boss, had stopped growling long enough to discuss the international situation and the stock markets with the young psychophant husband of Katherine, Walter Lurgar.

The discussion was cheerful enough, and subtly excluded me from the talk of men-and-high-finance. I knew that old Jerem was trying to bring out a nostalgic rash on me which would set me to reminiscing—enviously, wistfully, he hoped—about the days when I'd been a stockbrokerage slave under him and *had* to chime in on such boring discussions. But of course it didn't go.

Katherine, in the meantime, wandered around the house with Lynn, inspecting the rooms and the furniture and—from what I caught of it every so often—calling things “quaint” more or less indiscriminately.

I was, of course, by process of elimination, stuck with the job of making small talk with my mother-in-law, Mrs. Jerem.

I TOLD her I liked everything out here fine, and that Lynn seemed to be taking to the place, too. At which point she countered with several remarks to indicate that she doubted very much the veracity of my last statement.

The time passed somehow, and I mixed more drinks, and pretty soon it

was around three o'clock and I was getting just a trifle high on the toddies and old man Jerem wasn't doing so badly either.

Lynn and Katherine had ended the tour of the house, and Katherine was trying to get her rat-faced husband's attention away from his father-in-law long enough to indicate to him by subtle remarks that she thought the place was a hideously rustic mess.

It was all very much messed up with undercurrents as yet unspoken, and yet I knew that it wouldn't be smart strategy for me to be the one who brought the troubles to the surface. They were out here for one purpose—to try to make Lynn change her mind, abandon this fiendishly grim existence to which I was chaining her, and come back to New York with them.

Dinner was slated for five o'clock or thereabouts, and by three-thirty the odors of roasting turkey in the kitchen oven had pretty well attached themselves to everyone's nostrils. If my sense of smell was any criterion, Mrs. Spingler's cooking job on the turkey was going to turn into a triumph.

Around four o'clock Lynn went out into the kitchen to get another kettle of boiling water from the stove, and when she came back into the room a little later with the toddy mix, Mrs. Spingler moved unobtrusively behind her. When the cook and handywoman started upstairs, I knew that Lynn had told her to get up and see to it that bed-sheets adorned the mattresses in all the rooms—a matter which, to my knowledge, had not yet been taken care of.

Along about four-ten, I asked old Jerem:

“Well, what do you think of our humble abode.”

The expression on his face was in direct and obvious contradiction to his words. But he replied:

"It's a nice job of remodeling, I must say. Very cozy, Thomas. Extremely cozy." And then he added. "If one goes for this sort of life."

Oliver Jerem shot a pointed, pitying glance at his daughter as he said that, and the hair on the back of each neck in the room bristled electrically with the sudden tension.

"I certainly go for it," I said, giving him the only answer that came readily to my mind, and trying not to be defensive about it. "Yes, indeed. I certainly do, and I'm sure Lynn will feel just as I do very shortly."

The rain outside was gradually subsiding and I felt pretty certain that evening would find the stars out and the countryside at its early spring New England best. I mentioned this fact to break the silence that followed my challenging retort to old Jerem.

Tailor's dummy Walter Lurgar, Katherine's husband, came in with both feet and a black-jack on that conversational opening.

"That will be good," he said. "In fact, Tom, it'll be a bit of a blessed relief to me. I'm not too sophisticated to be superstition-proof, you know. And the legend I heard in the village about the history of this old place was certainly chilling."

OF COURSE, every eye in the room was fixed on the louse. I took a deep breath and tried my damndest, my futile damndest, to turn the conversation into another channel.

"Who'd like another drink?" I said cheerfully.

But no one was paying the least bit of attention to me; every eye was on Walter. And he continued as if I hadn't said a word to jar him from the track.

"Why, after what I'd heard in the village, the sight of this place, bleak and forbidding, outlined momentarily

against the sky as the lightning crackled through the storm, was enough to——"

I cut in again. Loudly, this time.

"You ought to write terror fiction, Walter," I laughed. "You must have a swell imagination to picture a remodeled, hundred percent modernized New England farmhouse as a bleak and forbidding ogre's castle."

Walter waited me out, a grin on his face.

"I apologize, old man," he cut in when he found a split second. "I didn't mean bleak and forbidding, exactly, except as a sort of figure of speech. I mean, I was thinking of the house at the time when the notorious brigands were slain here. I was thinking of it during the period it stayed unoccupied and became to be known around the village as haunted."

And so there it was. Out of the bag. Quite deliberately brought forth, as a matter of fact. I didn't have to glance at Lynn to know that she was staring at me in wide-eyed horror, and I didn't need a mirror to tell me that my own expression couldn't possibly conceal from her the fact that I'd known about the legend of the house being haunted and had deliberately kept it from her.

There was one of those silences that you could have measured with a voltmeter. Then I heard Lynn ask:

"What is all this about, Tom? What is Walter talking about?" Her voice was colder than the heart of an ice cube.

I did my best to don an amused grin.

"Oh, just some silly local superstition," I said. "I'd heard it, but hadn't even given it enough thought to mention it."

"Is that so?" Lynn asked with a rising inflection that foreshadowed no good. "Is that so? You heard that this place was supposed to be haunted; and you didn't think it worth mentioning?"

"That's right," I grinned sickly. "After all, the whole thing was ridiculous. Modern, intelligent minds have no room for such silly myths as haunted houses and all that sort of nonsense. Why should I have thought any more about it?"

The Jerem family, pop, mom, sis, and brother-in-law, were sitting back smugly and keeping out of this. They knew how to play it smart. Walter had started the ball rolling, and now all they had to do was sit back and watch it bounce wildly back and forth between Lynn and me until we were in the middle of a bloodthirsty battle.

The situation called for all I could give it. And I prayed that what I could give it would be enough, determining that since Lynn's family wanted a fight, that was just what they were not going to be privileged to witness.

My smile was still frozen on my face, and I was still waiting for Lynn's answer. The I-won't-make-a-fight-out-of-this attitude on my part had her slightly stalled, but not completely. At last she snorted:

"Really, Tom. Even though the superstition is positively ridiculous, to any one of intelligence, the very thought that this house is so considered by the townspeople of Chatam should have made you have sense enough not to rent it. Imagine—a house where desperadoes were slain at one time. It's revolting. Why, their blood might stain the earth all around this house."

I WAS beginning to perspire. I found a handkerchief and mopped my brow, stalling for time. Although Lynn hadn't put her last statement in the form of a question, I knew that she and the rest in the room were waiting for an answer, or some weak sort of rebuttal.

"Good lord," I said, "who knows

how many Indians died on the spot where Times Square is now located? Who knows how much of the early Dutch settler's blood now stains the site of Rockefeller Plaza? Why, countless bleached bones may lie in the mud of the river bottom under any foot of the Triborough Bridge. Yet does that keep people away from Times Square? Does it make them shudder and shun Rockefeller Plaza? Does it make them refuse to use the Triborough Bridge? Of course not—it would be ridiculous."

Old man Jerem came in with his two coppers' worth.

"What you say has some truth, Thomas. But you must remember that the cases you cited and the instance under discussion vary a great deal psychologically. No one thinks in terms of Times Square as a burial ground for scalped Indians. No one enters Rockefeller Plaza thinking that Dutch settlers' may have bled and died on the ground now covered by it. People think of the Triborough Bridge as strictly a means of transportation. This is quite a different matter. Apparently everyone in this locality had attached an unpleasant, though admittedly stupid, connotation to this place. They do not consider it as merely a remodeled farmhouse; they think of it in terms of brigands who were slain here and left some taint, some sort of a—uh——" he faltered momentarily.

"Curse," Walter put in obligingly.

"Curse," old Jerem nodded gratefully. "That's it. Left some sort of a curse on the place."

Lynn's mother, who'd managed to keep her mouth shut until now, couldn't stay out of it any longer.

She shuddered dramatically.

"It's — it's positively frightful! I mean, it's like living in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum and having a room in its famous Chamber of Horrors."

Katherine followed through for the last kick in my face.

"I don't think so," she said eagerly, face flushed in rapt excitement. "I think it would be thrilling to spend a night here." She half closed her eyes and squeezed her hands together in delight. "Just think, the ghosts of the brigands are undoubtedly supposed to be walking the house at midnight, or something. Why, the prospect of meeting them in one of the halls is a positively thrilling challenge!"

I mustered in as firm a tone as I could:

"I think the entire topic is silly. And I think that, if none of you have any objections, it could be just as well dropped right now. Frankly, it annoys me extremely."

The swift gambit of glances that were exchanged told me that each of Lynn's family was congratulating the other on having won an important round easily.

I glanced at Lynn, and her expression was unfathomable, although it wouldn't be difficult for me to guess what was going on in her mind.

Walter rose, smirking at me.

"Certainly, old man. If you want the topic dropped, dropped it will be. It's your place, you know, even though it is rumored to be haunted." He turned to Lynn. "I'll pop out in the kitchen a moment and get a drink of water, if you don't mind."

LYNN said she didn't and Katherine's husband left the room. It was at that instant that old Oliver Jerem coughed and asked if we'd excuse him a moment, since he had—in other words—to go to the gents' room.

That left Katherine, Lynn, their mother, yours truly, and a great big bundle of tension.

I lighted a cigarette and tried to look as nonchalant as the tobacco ads.

Katherine, devilishly, said: "Murad."

"And how have you been, Katherine?" I asked, rising and stepping over to the liquor cabinet to pour myself a big hooker of straight stuff.

The sounds started coming out of the fireplace in the next instant. Sounds coming from the attic, and suggesting something being dragged around up there. I froze stock-still, icicles forming on my spine.

"What on earth is that noise?" Lynn's mother demanded.

"It comes from the attic," I said. "Chimney runs through there."

Katherine said: "Oh."

Mrs. Jerem asked: "Who's up in the attic?"

I said: "The cook, I suppose."

Lynn stepped in.

"I didn't tell Mrs. Spingler to go up to the attic," she said. "I just sent her upstairs to fix the beds. What on earth can she be doing up there?"

The sounds stopped. I relaxed.

Walter waltzed back into the room, munching an olive he had evidently filched from one of the dishes Mrs. Spingler had been preparing in the kitchen.

"I'm starved," he said, tossing the olive pit at the fireplace and landing it on the rug.

"It's this rustic weather," Katherine said. "It would certainly play hell with a girl's figure if she stayed up here too long. My, she'd be stuffing herself ravenously all day long until she got as fat as a pig."

I took a deep swig of the scotch. There wasn't an angle Lynn's tribe were ignoring.

Mrs. Spingler came down the stairs, then. Lynn looked up as the cook started across the living room on her way to the kitchen, and asked:

"What were you doing in the attic, Mrs. Spingler?"

Martha Spingler's unlovely face wrinkled in bewilderment.

"Attic? I don't rightly understand what you mean, Missus Kelvin. I wasn't in the attic."

The expression that came suddenly into Lynn's eyes was not good—from my point of view. She said:

"Oh, nothing. Disregard it, Mrs. Spingler. We thought we heard sounds coming down the chimney from the attic, that's all."

"Wind, more'n likely," said the cook, taking leave.

"It didn't sound like wind to me," Mrs. Jerem said helpfully. "It sounded like something being dragged over a floor."

"What're you people talking about?" demanded Walter.

Katherine obligingly brought him up to date on the matter, explaining about the sounds from the attic.

"Well," said Walter, "well, well. If Tom hadn't outlawed the topic, I'd say that—But," and he grinned good-humoredly, "we can't talk about ghosts and houses that are supposed to have them."

Mrs. Spingler's cry was loud and stricken.

For a moment we all gaped toward the kitchen in frozen horror. The cook's scream had been blood-curdling enough to make your hair stand up strand by strand.

I was the first one out there. The others followed.

Mrs. Spingler was standing in the kitchen staring at the open door of the oven, apparently stricken into statue-like frigidity by what she saw.

"What's wrong?" I cried, taking her arm and shaking her gently. "Tell us, what's wrong?"

Mrs. Spingler pointed a dramatic finger at the oven door and the compartment beyond it.

"It's gone!" she said. "It's vanished. The turkey is gone!"

IN THE moment of silence that followed, we all tried to digest that bit of information as quickly as possible, by staring into the empty oven.

"Broiler tin and all," wailed Mrs. Spingler. "Gone—plain vanished into thin air!"

Then, of course, someone—maybe it was me—made the remarks that that was impossible. Someone else added that it must have been stolen. And I turned to see how Walter Lurgar was taking it. He was, it seemed, as astonished as the rest of us.

But I had a hunch that the lull in the excitement wouldn't last long, and took immediate advantage of it by moving quietly over to the cellar door, which was in the right corner of the kitchen, then to the back door—in the opposite corner.

A quick glance at the first showed me that it was locked, and that the key was protruding on the kitchen side. The back door was also locked, key on kitchen side. But I turned the key quite casually, mentally praying that it wouldn't be noticed.

I wasn't. When I joined the circle around the oven again I had at least the satisfaction of having twisted evidence to make a plausible explanation of the turkey's disappearance.

Walter went into action, a moment later. He went to the cellar door, as I had done, and with his hand on the knob, asked in sherlockian tones:

"Where does this door lead to?"

Lynn told him the cellar. Walter saw, then, that the door was locked and that the key was on his side of it. He stepped across the room to the back door.

"That leads out into the back lawn and garage beyond that," I told him.

Walter glanced down at the key, as he turned the knob. The door opened immediately.

"There's the answer," I broke in quickly. "Some sneak thief crept in here when Mrs. Spingler was upstairs working, filched the entire bird right out of the oven, broiler pan and all, and hit for the woods."

"I didn't leave that back door open," Mrs. Spingler wailed suddenly. "I left it locked."

All eyebrows instantly elevated a notch.

"And I certainly didn't touch the door or the lock while I was back here in your cook's temporary absence," broke in Walter. "Who else left the living room?"

"Your father-in-law," I said maliciously.

"Really!" Mrs. Jerem gave me a shocked stare.

"But he didn't come back here," I said. The only way into this kitchen is through the back door—which is now unlocked—and through the dining-room door. Anyone entering the dining-room would have to pass through the living room, and we know no one did that. Q.E.D. A sneak thief came in the back door and made off with the turkey."

OLIVER JEREM walked in on the tail of my summation.

"What goes on here?" he demanded.

Everyone, save your's truly, told him at once. When he had finally gotten the matter straight, he turned on me.

"Good heavens, Thomas, what sort of country is this out here? Thieves running rampant, doors miraculously opened, turkeys stolen, footpads terrorizing decent citizens."

"You're a little bit ahead of yourself," I said. "No one is terrorizing anyone as yet, as far as I can see."

Old Jerem frowned disapprovingly.

"That's the next step, Thomas, my boy. You mark my words. I don't like this, any of this. Frankly, I knew this entire idea of yours, taking Lynn from decent surroundings into dangerous, savage forests and untold hardship, would turn out something like this."

I began to get hot under the collar.

"Don't talk such nonsense," I snapped. "This isn't far-off Tibet. It's civilization of the New England variety, located less than a day's drive from New York City. The forests around here all full of peacefully grazing cows. The dangerous Indian trails carry Burma Shave signs. I'm getting fed up with the general impression you people are trying to create!"

Old Jerem was staring at me foolishly.

"You arrived in a storm that could happen anywhere. Your disposition was ruined because you happened to be forced to walk through rain and mud for a mile because of a washed-out roadway that was an act of God. Now a turkey is stolen by some petty sneak thief, and you try to make it sound like we're being stalked down slowly but inevitably by Jack the Ripper." I took a deep breath. "Nuts!" I declared as an anti-climax.

I turned my back on them all and stalked into the living room, realizing that I'd probably pulled a tactical boner as far as Lynn's reaction was concerned, but glad to have gotten some of my feelings on the matter off my chest.

I stepped up to the liquor cabinet to pour myself a Big Joe.

All the liquor was gone. Not a single bottle was left!

There had been two full bottles, unopened, and one about finished. But now there weren't any. I stepped back from the cabinet as though it were alive and capable of biting.

And at that instant, while I was staring aghast at the cabinet, Lynn, her father, mother, sister and brother-in-law, trooped into the living room.

"What now?" Jerem thundered, before I could wipe the expression of amazement from my features.

Walter helped out by rushing to my side to gape at the empty cabinet.

"The liquor," he blurted. "Tom had two or three bottles there just a moment ago when we went into the kitchen. Now there isn't one of them left!"

I could gladly have throttled my brother-in-law by marriage right then and there. In an instant a circle just like the one that had formed incredulously before the empty oven had gathered before the empty liquor cabinet.

And then, of course, I saw the note.

It wasn't folded this time, but it was written on the same coarse brown butcher's paper that the other one had been scrawled on.

I BEAT Walter in the grab for it by a split second. One glance at the crude, scrawling, charcoaled script was enough to tell me that it was—save for the message—identical to the one I'd had left in my topcoat pocket just that afternoon.

"*Now will yew git while the gitting is good?*" it read.

I was crumpling it into a ball to toss it into the fireplace when Oliver Jerem, cleverly anticipating my move, snatched it from my hand.

"Let me see that, Thomas!" he grunted.

I stood there helplessly, while Lynn's father smoothed out the coarse paper and read the message on it. He read it once, frowned, then read it again. Then he looked up and fixed me with a glare.

"What is this all about?" he demanded.

I colored, and began to splutter around for an answer. I knew that Lynn and the others had all seen my effort at disposing of the note in the fireplace, and it didn't place me in any light other than that of suspicion.

"How should I know?" was the best that I was finally able to get out of me. And from the instant reaction of the others, I knew it wasn't especially convincing.

Mrs. Spingler's hysterical outburst didn't exactly save the situation, but at least it created a diversion.

The cook had come up behind the rest of us silently, had heard enough to figure out what this second riot was all about, and then let out a shriek.

"I am not a-staying here another minute!" she wailed shrilly. "I'm a-packing bag and baggage right this instant."

And with that our unlovely but wonderfully capable cook turned and made for the stairs and her bedroom.

"Ohhhh!" Lynn wailed. "What are we going to do? Whatever are we going to do?"

I tried to step into the breach.

"Now there's no sense in our losing our heads over two trivial incidents such as those," I said. "We can persuade Martha to stay long enough to prepare dinner, and——"

"What dinner?" Katherine cut in acidly.

"Why—ah—uh—we can throw something together, surely," I stammered, glaring at her.

Oliver Jerem cleared his throat angrily.

"I presume your telephone is in working order," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Sure it is. That's an idea. We can call the village and get the restaurant there to send up something already cooked to take the place of the turkey, and——"

Jerem cut me off.

"I will call the village to get the town garage to send a limousine and a towing truck out here. The first to carry us to the local train station, the second to remove my limousine from the mud your stupidity caused it to bog down in," he said. "As soon as they arrive we will say good-bye, Thomas. We have had quite enough of this week-end not to want any more."

I STARTED to protest that it was raining outside, and then saw that the downpour was over. I looked at Lynn, and became sickly aware of which side she was on.

"If you care to explain what that note means, and why you tried to destroy it," old man Jerem said, "it would be of interest to me, although it wouldn't alter my plans one iota."

I shrugged dejectedly.

"I wrote it myself," I said, "as a big gag. I ingeniously managed to steal the turkey out of the oven while sitting in the front room with Mrs. Jerem, Lynn, and the rest of you. I am a Master Criminal and on cold, moonless nights I grow claws and howl weirdly at the sky, blood running down the corners of my——"

"Tom!" Lynn blazed, cutting me off and glaring at me disgustedly. "That isn't funny!"

"You're telling me," I said.

Walter Lurgar piped up then.

"Quite possibly you are behind all this, old boy. That convertible cutting us off on the road a mile from the place—when you knew we'd be forced to walk fully a mile in the filthy storm—could have been a premeditated welcome note on your part. You might well have slipped the village idiot five dollars to make noises in your attic upstairs that would come out of the fireplace and frighten us. Perhaps you

planned to recount the haunted house legend about the place later in the evening, when such sound effects, cleverly built toward that end, would frighten us out of our wits."

I didn't bother to keep the hostility out of my voice and eyes as I stared at Walter.

"Is that right?" I said. "You seem to be full of ideas as to how I play host. Go ahead, how would I arrange to have the hooch snatched out of the liquor cabinet? How would I plant the warning note in the childish scrawl?"

Walter was glad to give out with ideas on those angles.

"Simple, enough. The village idiot, after stealing the turkey from a door you left open for him, and getting up into the attic to make noises, just waited until the commotion about the turkey started, slipped downstairs, took the liquor, and left by the front door. You planted the note yourself, then pretended to find it when we came out here."

I smiled.

"You're certainly full of ideas for a pumpkin head," I told him.

I stepped in quickly and planted a right hook on Walter's pointed chin. He went down to the floor like a tired sock, to the accompaniment of screams from Lynn, Katherine and Mrs. Jerem.

I whirled to face the old man.

"And as for you, you old fossil," I snapped. "I'd beat the living devil out of you if you were twenty years younger. Now make that damned telephone call, and the sooner you leave, the better I'll like it!"

AND with that for an exit line, I turned my back on them all and left the room. I passed a muttering, white-faced Mrs. Spingler on the staircase. She had all her things, a suitcase, a flock of lurid magazines, and a bird

cage, in her arms.

"Climb on your broom and blow out of here," I suggested.

She continued muttering and went down into the living room.

I didn't go to the bedroom. Instead, I turned to the right and started down the hallway to Mrs. Spingler's room. But that wasn't my destination. I stopped at the small door on the left side of the hallway about fifteen feet from the cook's ex-room. It was the door opening onto the small steps leading up into the attic.

I was finally getting around to taking a look up there.

The steps were steep, and the slanted ceiling low, forcing me to keep my head down or crack it hard. My back was aching when I reached the top of the stairs and was finally able to straighten up.

The attic wasn't very large as attics go. It was, for a width of twenty feet, high beamed enough to permit me to stand without stooping. But it was short. There were windows, small ones, at either end, and they permitted enough gloomy gray twilight into the room to make visibility possible, though limited.

I looked around most carefully, and saw exactly nothing.

The place was quite bare.

I walked over to the end where the chimney passed through from the floors below and up out of the roof. There was a small, fireproofed vent in the brick which would carry sound down through the fireplace easily enough.

Slowly, I worked my way around the darkened nooks and corners, not leaving any of them until certain they were barren. After about five minutes more of this careful inspection, I was convinced that the place was absolutely empty.

I sat down on the floor, pulled out a

cigarette, and lighted it. For five or six minutes I sat there smoking and reflecting on what a horrible mess everything was in.

Lynn would leave with her relatives, of course. I had seen her intention to do just that in her eyes. I didn't have to be told.

I looked at the slightly skinned spots on the knuckles of my right hand and felt a sour sort of satisfaction in having at last told Walter precisely what I thought of him.

But the sensation couldn't counterbalance the fact that I'd lost the important scrap, and that Papa and Mama and Sis Jerem were walking off with their daughter.

I thought for a while about how nice my marital status might have been had I married an orphan.

And eventually I found myself thinking about the Baggat boys.

"You damned stinkers," I muttered aloud, "you've fixed everything wonderfully, haven't you?"

Of course, I didn't get any answer, and hadn't expected one. I sighed, and took another deep drag on my smoke, then crushed it out carefully on the floor.

"Wise guys, aren't you, Baggat boys?" I muttered. "So damn wise you don't even now that the siege is all over and that the posse has gone home a long time again, and that you can get out now."

It was ridiculous, of course. I was just in the mood for some sour clowning, however, and I went on.

"Sure," I muttered aloud. "They've all gone home, and you've had a perfectly good chance to beat it and come out of hiding after all these years. No posse, no shooting. Just walk out bold as brass. Hell, you couldn't be seen in broad daylight, for that matter. People can't see ghosts."

I got up and started for the steps leading down out of the attic.

"Do as you please, boys," I said.

I HEARD the noise behind me just as I started down the stairs. It almost scared me into a headlong forward sprawl. Righting my balance, I turned and saw the coarse sheet of butcher's paper lying on the attic floor less than ten feet away from me.

Of course I almost broke my neck, swiveling my head around frantically to locate the person or persons who'd dropped that note there and made a noise to attract my attention to it.

But the attic was still as barren as before. It contained nothing but the note and Thomas Kelvin; who promptly picked it up and stared at it in wonder.

"Why dint sumone tell us this afore? Thanx fer the tipoff, pardner. Yew arr awl rite."

It was written in the same loose, childish scrawl that the other notes had displayed, and, like the other notes, done with charcoal.

I felt a tiny shiver move up from the base of my spine until it buzzed the hair on the nape of my neck. I stuffed the note into my pocket, looked once quickly around the absolutely empty attic, and bolted down the stairs in much haste.

As I closed the attic door behind me, and stood there a moment in the hallway, I heard voices coming up the stairs from the hallway below. Voices and the faint purr of an automobile motor.

One of the voices was Lynn's.

"You're right, I guess, Father," she was saying. "It will be best to leave with you now. There's no telling what he might do if I had to stay here alone with him."

My stomach turned somersaults.

"Well, hurry, Lynn. We can't wait all evening," her father's voice boomed. "Don't try to take everything. Just pack a small bag. He can ship you the rest of the things later."

I heard Lynn's footsteps starting up the stairs, and I waited there sickly, not knowing quite what to do. As she rounded the bannister at the landing she saw me, stared right through me, and went on into our room.

I heard her rummaging around in the closets, dragging out a small weekend bag, opening and closing drawers, clicking coat hangers, and making all the other incidental sound effects necessary to a departure.

Her father's voice trumpeted suddenly from the bottom of the staircase.

"Lynn!"

She came to the door of the bedroom, and still ignoring me utterly, answered:

"Yes, Father?"

"I forgot my brief case. Important papers in it. On the bed in the guest room your mother and I occupied. Would you get it?"

"All right. I will," she said.

Lynn walked past me to the guest room in which her father had stayed. I was still just part of the wallpaper as far as she was concerned.

I heard her call out from the guest room:

"It isn't on the bed, Father."

But the old boy downstairs didn't hear her, and consequently didn't answer.

Then Lynn exclaimed:

"There it is. It fell under the bed. I see the edge sticking out!"

I heard her grunt in exertion as she got down on all fours to get at the briefcase under the bed. And then I heard her horrified cry of dismay.

FORGETTING that I wasn't wanted around, I made a quick dash into the

guest room.

"What's wrong, Lynn?" I began in alarm.

And then I saw the reason for her exclamation of horrified shock. She was still on her hands and knees, holding up the cover of the bed to reveal a briefcase on the floor beneath it and—behind the briefcase—half a dozen empty whisky bottles of the brand I had had in the liquor cabinet before the theft!

"Jeeeeudas!" I exclaimed.

Lynn looked up in red-cheeked confusion and bewilderment. She forgot that she wasn't speaking to me.

"What does this mean?" she asked, pointing to the bottles.

"Those are the bottles filched from the liquor cabinet," I said. "They're empty. The stuff has either been poured out of the window or tipped, or both."

"But under Father's bed——" Lynn stammered in shocked disbelief.

I shrugged elaborately.

"I don't accuse people without evidence, baby," I said. "You draw your own conclusion from what you see."

Lynn picked up the brief case and got to her feet. And the brief case, being unlocked and upside down, spilled its contents out onto the floor.

Letters, legal and financial papers, envelopes and graphs comprised most of the briefcases's contents. Part of same, however, proved to be torn, note-sized sheets of crude butcher's brown paper. A piece of charcoal was also evident among the mess.

"That's—that's the same sort of paper that threatening note was written on," Lynn gasped, "and probably with that very piece of charcoal."

Again I shrugged, unable to trust my voice.

"But then Father must have been planning to break us up, to get me back

to New York and——" Lynn paused. "Just a minute," she cried.

I followed her out of the guest room into the one adjoining it which had been occupied by Walter and Lynn's sister Katherine.

Lynn's instinct was unerring. She made for the closet, threw open the door. A double turkey broiler pan lay on the floor of the closet. In it were bones, Turkey bones, nothing else.

Lynn turned to face me, biting deep into her underlip, eyes damp.

"Tommy," she said. "They were trying to get me to leave you. They were conspiring against you. Poor Tommy—you suspected it all along and you were too sporting to say anything!"

I shrugged, able to speak a few words, noncommittal words.

"Well, Lynn, I won't say that, though I won't deny evidence."

"Tommy!" Lynn exclaimed. "It's so perfectly clear now. All of it is. Every bit of it, including the last two years when they've played on my selfishness to keep both of us under their thumbs. How can you ever forgive me, darling?"

THE thundering voice that boomed up the staircase belonged to Lynn's dad.

"Are you going to hurry?" it demanded.

Lynn smiled grimly at me, then walked out to the bannister and leaned over, shouting down to her father. She had the briefcase, and the contents—minus the wrapping paper—had been returned to it.

"Father!" she called sweetly.

I could visualize old Jerem as he frowned and boomed:

"Yes?"

He undoubtedly poked his head upward at the bannister where Lynn waited, for the next thing I knew, Lynn had let fly with the briefcase, and there

was the *thump* of the leather object colliding with skull, plus a bellow of pain and outraged dignity from Oliver Jerem.

"Go away, Father," Lynn said. "And take the others with you. You can all come back when you promise to let my life and Tom's alone!"

There was quite a lot of sound then. All of it bewildered and indignant and coming from Oliver Jerem and those who waited outside in the hired limousine.

Eventually, the motor started up, and the car rolled off. By that time Lynn had been in my arms for five minutes. She stroked my arm with her hand, a little later, and said:

"Am I forgiven, Tommy?"

I thought a moment.

"For everything but that pancake layer right in the bean. There was syrup on it."

Lynn sighed.

"I suppose you'll hit me sometime when I'm not looking."

"I suppose," I agreed.

There was a silence. Then Lynn said:

"It wasn't very flattering, their cooking up a haunted house and ghost story to scare me away from here and you. Do you imagine Dad and Walter figured I'd believe it?"

I figured I might as well tell her the truth, or part of it.

"The story Walter told about hearing in the village is actually local legend, baby," I said. "People around these parts have really believed this farmhouse is haunted for a long time. You're Dad and Walter probably planned to enlarge on it a little to make me look like a heel who'd force his wife to live in a place full of bats and cobwebs and secret panels."

Lynn was surprised.

"There's really such a legend?" she said. Then she added: "But of course it's ridiculous. Just as you said, intelligent, modern people aren't frightened by such stupidity."

I nodded sagely.

"Of course not, baby."

"I thought of the note I'd found in the attic. The thank you note for the information I'd spilled in my pseudo-clowning oration to the Baggat boys. I thought, too, of the first note, found in my pocket some hours before Lynn's folks had arrived at the place. And, of course, there had been the ransacking of my baggage right after we'd arrived. The Jerem relatives hadn't been around when that had occurred.

I grinned, marveling at the skill with which a pair of ghosts had framed damning evidence and tied it around the necks of Oliver Jerem and Walter Lurgar—just out of thanks for a get-away tipoff that was a considerable number of decades too late.

"What are you thinking of?" Lynn asked.

I snapped out of my reflections.

"Ever hear of the Baggat boys?" I asked.

"No," Lynn said. "Who are they?"

"Couple of tough monkeys," I said vaguely.

"What about them?" Lynn persisted.

"Oh, nothing," I said. "I was just wondering how in the hell they were able to hide out without being seen by the posse line around the house."

"What?" Lynn frowned.

"Nothing important," I said. "I was just thinking, though, that it would sure as hell have been interesting to be inside the bullet-riddled farmhouse when whatever happened to the Baggat boys happened, if you know what I mean."

"I'm afraid," sighed Lynn, "that I don't."

THE END

THE MUSKETEERS IN PARIS

By

**WILLIAM P.
McGIVERN**



***Heroes from the past
came back to save France
in this, her darkest hour***

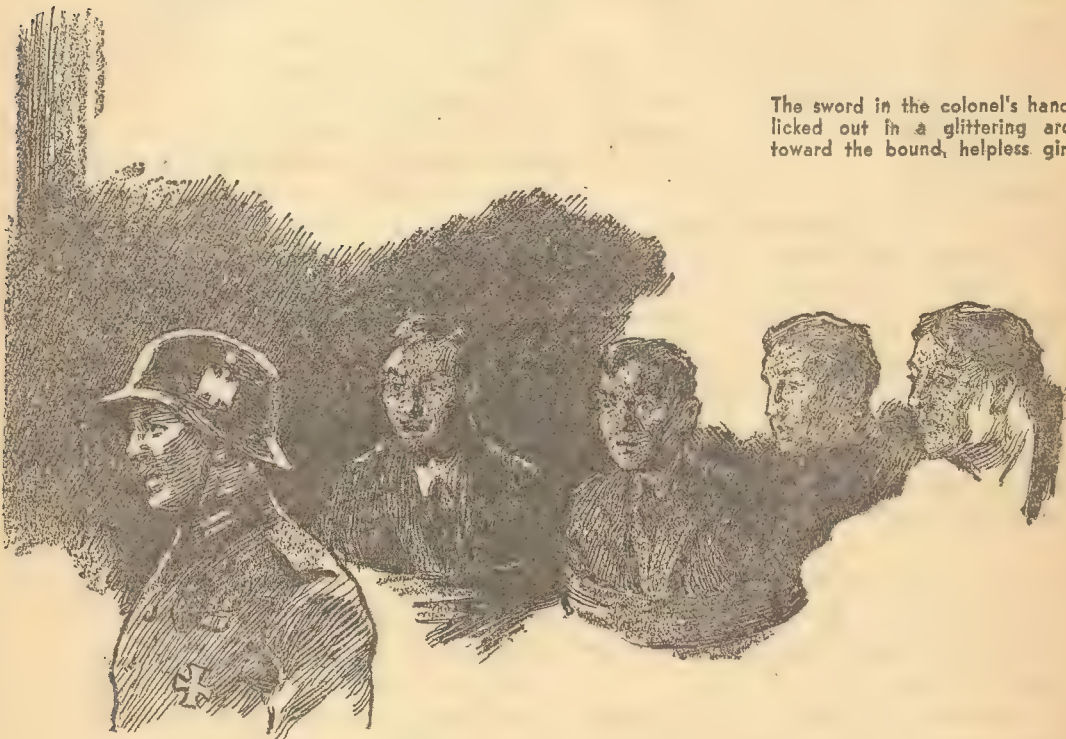
THE city of Paris was quiet and dark. Occasionally the slow rhythmic tramp of a Gestapo sentry broke the stillness, and at times a flicker of light would show from a quickly opened tavern door as a German officer reeled into the blackness of the street; but occasions like these were not frequent and through the long brooding night-hours the great city lay

few. The results of such carelessness are generally always violent and swift.

The exception to this rule was a small, slightly built man with an alert intelligent face and bright eyes that probed into the dark passageways between buildings without fear or nervousness. His attitude was of a man waiting for something to happen.

And within another block something

The sword in the colonel's hand
licked out in a glittering arc
toward the bound, helpless girl



shrouded under a pall of dark, bitter silence.

Considering this, the man who walked with calm purpose along one of Paris' dark lanes was an incongruous sight. He wore no uniform; he was obviously a Frenchman, and it was several hours after the general curfew. Frenchmen do not walk the streets of Paris at night. They might move quietly through dark alleys, their steps soundless as a cat's, a gleaming knife in their hands; but never do they walk calmly through the streets after cur-

few. did happen.

A harsh authoritative voice sounded suddenly from the blackness behind the walking man; and heavy-booted feet approached on the run.

The little man walked on unconcerned until he reached a place where the street intersected a dark alley. The voice behind him sounded again, angry, belligerent, and the thudding boots were closer. The little man stopped then, in the darker shadow of the alley, turned and calmly awaited the arrival of the SS officer.

The officer, a young man with small cold eyes in a narrow face, was panting from his run. He snapped on his torch and pointed the beam of light into the little man's face.

"Who are you?" he snapped angrily. "Let me see your papers! You are French?"

"Yes, I am a Frenchman," the little man replied. He squinted against the light, but his manner was completely calm and devoid of nervousness.

"Give me your papers!" the SS officer said curtly, holding out his hand. "You realize that it is after curfew?"

"Yes," the little man said, "I am aware of that."

The SS officer stiffened angrily.

"You are aware that it is after curfew and still you are on the streets." He breathed heavily through thin nostrils. "You are in very serious trouble. This matter shall be reported directly to the colonel in charge of this area. What is your name?"

"My name is Phillip Poincare," the little man said.

THE SS officer was still holding out his gloved hand.

"I asked you for your papers," he said. "Where are they?"

"Papers?" the little man said quietly. There was the faintest trace of a smile on his face as he shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid I don't have any papers."

"No papers!" The SS officer's voice was suddenly harsh and bitter. "Don't tell me you left them at your home! That is no excuse."

"I didn't leave them at home," said the little man patiently. "I told you I don't have any papers." He stepped backward slowly, and the SS officer instinctively moved toward him, a quick suspicion on his narrow face.

He grabbed the little man by the lapels of his worn coat and shook him

roughly.

"You think this funny?" he said harshly. "We shall see how funny it is when you are strapped to the flogging post of a concentration camp. Your smart answers then will not be humorous."

"I am not trying to be humorous," said the little man quietly. "There is nothing funny in Paris today—for Frenchmen. We are not laughing, but neither are we crying."

The SS officer regarded him carefully, a new light in his eyes.

"The colonel will be very happy to talk with you," he said, measuring the words carefully as if he were pouring acid into a test tube. "He is always interested in those of you who still think of resistance and revolt. You will interest him very much." His lips flattened in a slow deadly grin. "But you will not interest him very long," he said, "because you will not be alive very long."

The little man returned the officer's smile, and his eyes were as cold as steel in the winter snow.

"I think you are wrong," he said. "I think it is you who will not be alive very long."

As he spoke a huge dark shape moved against the darkness of the alley; a huge dark shape that crept ominously toward the German officer.

"Your threats are idle," the officer said, smiling coldly. "A dozen of my men are within sound of my voice. And if you move, I will shoot you down the same instant. Raise your hands. I am going to search——"

The officer's voice faded in a choking gasp. A great powerful arm was about his neck, pressing with inexorable force against his wind-pipe. His mouth opened and closed desperately as he fought to cry out, to suck air into his tortured lungs.

Under the pressure of the thick arm he was bent slowly, helplessly back, his eyes wild with mad fear, his mottled face working convulsively.

THE little man impassively watched the officer's frantic, threshing struggles for a moment, then he turned slowly and glanced up and down the length of the dark deserted street.

He continued to watch for several minutes and he did not turn again until he felt a hand on his arm.

"*Mon Dieu*," a voice whispered in his ear. "These Germans are poor sport. A hand on the wind-pipe and they collapse like little children. It is enough to disgust an honest fighting man."

"You did a fine job, Porthos," Phillip Poincare said. "I wasn't sure you had been able to get here. If you hadn't I'd have been in a bad way."

"Thank you, my little Phillip," the huge Porthos said solemnly. "What will we do with the swine now?"

"Is he dead?" Phillip asked.

"No," Porthos said, "he is still breathing, but he will be unconscious for some time."

"Good," Phillip said. "Take him into the alley. Strip him. Take everything. Papers, letters, clothing, rings, Don't leave a thing."

"All right," Porthos agreed.

"One other thing," Phillip said, "the German got a good look at me. I am afraid he might recognize me if he saw me again."

"He will not see you again," Porthos said. "He will not see anyone again."

He turned and his great bulk faded into the darkness.

Phillip stood at the entrance of the alley, looking carefully up and down the street. He heard nothing and saw nothing, but not for an instant did his eyes lose their gleam of steady watch-

fulness.

Phillip Poincare had not always been so coolly indifferent to the prospects of violent danger. His life until the last few months had been so prosaically commonplace as to be almost a burlesque of conventionality. Sometimes when he thought of that existence and the dull routine of his work as an assistant bookkeeper of an industrial house in Chicago, it all seemed as remote and intangible as the substance of a half-remembered dream.

As he stood in the darkness of the Paris street he was thinking of that existence and the incredible events which had removed him from it forever.

He thought fleetingly of the memorable day on which he had purchased the antique French bookcase, the pride with which he had added it to his collection of other relics of the France he knew so well and loved so much.

But the aftermath of that purchase had been so startlingly incredible that he had, at first, thought it was some wild nightmare he was experiencing.*

For from that bookcase, where they had been entombed by the Cardinal Duke de Richelieu, emerged four colorful, dramatic figures—Athos, Porthos, Aramis and most dashing of all, D'Artagnan, the leader of the three musketeers whose exploits had been celebrated a century before by the elder Dumas.

* Enchanted Bookshelf, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, March, 1943. In the bookshelf which Phillip Poincare purchased was an original manuscript of *The Three Musketeers*, by Dumas, containing the ectoplasmic residue of the actual musketeers and D'Artagnan, from whom Dumas had drawn his immortal characters. Phillip Poincare unwittingly broke the spell of their entombment and they returned to life. Their entombment had been accomplished by Cardinal Richelieu to save them from hanging. They became adjusted to the Twentieth Century quickly, and by their skill and courage saved a beautiful agent of General de Gaulle from the hands of Major Lanser, a Nazi, who was apprehended by D'Artagnan and eventually slain by Athos in a duel.—Ed.

Phillip had never fully comprehended the miracle of their presence. Without questioning too much he had accepted them, learned to respect them and finally he came to idolize them for their gay courage that mocked at odds and smiled at danger.

And most miraculous of all they had accepted him. And when Athos, Porthos and Aramis had insisted on coming to France to fight for their country, he had asked to accompany them. D'Artagnan had stayed with the red-haired girl who was an agent for De Gaulle and who owed her life to his magic sword and cool courage.

The three musketeers had come to by way of Lisbon and then Spain. They had been in Paris only a week but already they had contacted workers of the underground, whose influence and membership embraced the whole of France.

Phillip was thinking these thoughts with only a subconscious awareness; his main concentration was on the dark street and his ear was alert for any sound that might break the sepulchral stillness.

BUT nothing broke the silence of the night and in a few moments Porthos was back at his side, a bundle of clothing under his arm.

"I have everything," he whispered. "We had better be going."

"And the German?" Phillip asked.

He could see Porthos' slow grin vaguely in the darkness.

"There is now one less Nazi to dishonor the soil of our fair France," Porthos said.

Phillip felt no qualms or guilt. He knew that it was necessary to use the means and weapons of the enemy if they ever hoped to destroy him utterly and completely. And anything short of that would not be enough.

"Let's go," he said.

"Follow me," Porthos said, "I know the route through the alley as well as I once knew the way to a fair young woman who lived close to this neighborhood." He sighed lugubriously. "*Mon Dieu*, but that was over a hundred years ago. She would not interest me now."

"Athos and Aramis will be worrying if we don't return soon," Phillip said.

Porthos grinned good-naturedly.

"They are too worried about the shortage of wine to bother with anything so trivial."

Phillip felt a glow inside him and a sudden sharp sense of happiness that was almost too much to bear. He took a long deep breath.

"Yes, I guess you're right," he said, smiling into the darkness.

That was all he said.

CHAPTER II

PORTHOS rapped sharply, three long knocks and one short, on the wooden door that opened on the third floor landing of the dilapidated house to which he had led Phillip.

The door was opened immediately by a handsome young man with a frank open countenance, warm eyes and a smiling mobile mouth. His hair was dark and it swept back from his high forehead in careless waves.

"Here are the wanderers, Aramis," he said over his shoulder to a plump, fastidious, blond young man who was staring pensively at Porthos and Phillip with bright blue eyes. "My wager is that they spent their time chasing a wench instead of doing their work as true Frenchmen."

Aramis frowned and plucked a bit of lint from his shaggy coat.

"What work is more becoming to a true Frenchman than chasing

wenches?" he asked ironically.

Porthos and Phillip entered and closed the door.

The room was sparsely furnished and dismal. The only light was provided by a guttering candle in the corner. Heavy cloth covered the one window.

"Hold your flashing wit, Athos," Porthos growled to the young man who had met them at the door. "We have been chasing rats instead of wenches, which is pleasant enough in its way, but not quite so interesting."

He dumped the clothing he had removed from the officer on the floor.

"The hide of the rat," he grunted.

Athos went to his knees beside the pile of cloth.

"May the saints be praised, as the good Cardinal would say," he cried. "A German uniform—an officer's at that. Porthos, you will be the death of me yet. Anyone else would have been satisfied with just a uniform, but not you! It must be an officer's uniform. I salute you, brother of the ox, you are *magnifique*."

"I had nothing to do with the selection," Porthos said. "Phillip lured the quarry. I simply closed the trap."

"We mustn't waste too much time talking," Phillip said earnestly. "That uniform may do one of us for a while, but the rest of us need clothes and papers. We're running a risk every hour we spend in Paris without clearance papers."

"You must calm yourself," Aramis said. He shook his round blond head seriously. "These Germans are completely without imagination or brains, as they were a hundred years ago when we ran them through so often and easily that it grew monotonous. You must not worry too much about them; they don't deserve such concern."

"But there are many of them," Athos said thoughtfully. "They are well pre-

pared and equipped. I agree with Phillip. We are not in the best of situations. We must not underestimate our enemy."

"Let's see which of us this uniform fits," Phillip said. "The officer's papers and identification are all here. Perhaps one of us can assume the identity of the German officer."

THE uniform was to tight for Aramis, too large for Phillip, hopelessly too small for the mighty Porthos, but it fitted Athos almost perfectly. When he was completely dressed, from glistening black boots to peaked cap he looked at them for approbation.

"Am I the perfect German type?" he smiled. He glanced down at his swastika-emblazoned blouse and grimaced. "I don't feel clean when I look at that thing," he said.

"Then don't look at it," Aramis said.

Athos leafed through the officer's papers, then stuffed them into his pocket.

"For the time," he smiled, "I am *Oberleutnant* Mueller of Bavaria, detailed in Paris for an indefinite period to help enforce the beauties of the New Order."

"Now we must arrange something for the rest of us," Phillip said. "The underground is doing its best to procure for us papers that will give us the freedom of the city. But they work very slowly. We must make an effort ourselves to get identification papers. Without them we haven't got a chance."

"Tomorrow is another day," Aramis yawned. "Time enough then to start worrying." He looked disgustedly about the small, dismal room. "The thought of sleeping again in this sty is nauseating, but," he shrugged, "I suppose it must be borne." His thoughts shifted to another subject. "Has anyone made plans for breakfast? We

have only a small piece of cheese and half a loaf of stale bread left. I'd trade my sword for a bottle of wine," he said wistfully.

Porthos laughed, a rumbling chuckle that set the thin walls trembling.

"This does my soul good," he said. "To see the dainty Aramis, the pet of the women of Paris and the chief support of half the lace-makers and perfumers in the kingdom starving in a garret and sleeping on a pile of straw. D'Artagnan would enjoy the spectacle."

"I wish D'Artagnan were with us," Aramis said bitterly. "He wouldn't put up for a minute with this foul stinking hole. He would have silk sheets and red wine if he had to run through all the Germans in Paris to get them."

"Gascon D'Artagnan," Athos smiled. "I wonder if we shall ever see our headstrong cavalier again? I wonder where he is now and what he is doing?"

"Wherever he is," Porthos said, "you may be sure his friends are happy and his enemies are miserable. And you may also wager that with him can be found excitement, danger and a good laugh."

PHILLIP was listening to the conversation, but he was also listening subconsciously for any sound outside their small room. And suddenly he held up one hand warningly.

"Listen," he whispered.

From the street below, a faint shout, harsh and authoritative drifted to their ears. Athos looked significantly at the other three and then stepped quietly to the window that overlooked the street.

Aramis pinched out the candle as Athos drew back the heavy window covering and peered down into the darkness of the street. He turned away a moment later, replaced the window covering and smiled thoughtfully at his three companions.

"The street is being searched," he

said. "Every room will be inspected." He lit the candle and watched its flickering flame for a moment. "They will be here very shortly," he murmured.

As he spoke, they all heard a tramp of feet on the steps that led to their room.

"It will take them a little while to search the floors below us," he said quietly.

Phillip said, "They probably discovered the body of the German officer."

"Yes," Porthos said, glancing at Athos who wore the dead officer's uniform, "and that makes that uniform useless. You'd better get out of it and throw it into the street before they arrive here."

"I don't think so," Athos said quietly. "It isn't likely that they have identified *Oberleutnant* Mueller as yet. And throwing away the uniform would gain us nothing. There are men in the street below who would see from where it fell."

"The rest of us are caught," Aramis said. "Without papers we won't have a chance. But you must manage to get away Athos; for," he grinned wickedly, "it will be your task to pry us loose from their clutches." He chuckled. "I don't envy you, friend Athos. We will sit quietly in warm cells, eating comfortably while you go about the unpleasant job of liberating us."

Athos smiled at him.

"Thank you, Aramis," he said quietly. "Deserting one's friends is not easy to stomach. You are making it slightly easier for me to leave. If I am lucky I can escape from here, but saving you from them may be impossible."

"You are talking like an old woman," scoffed Porthos. "When a thing is impossible it just takes a little longer to accomplish."

There was a sudden clatter of boots on their landing and a harsh voice cried,

"Open immediately!"

A heavy knock sounded on the door, repeated instantly by several more.

Phillip looked uncertainly at Athos.

"Open the door, Phillip," Athos said.

PHILLIP stepped to the door, quickly opened it, and two husky German soldiers strode arrogantly into the room, their eyes suspicious and alert. Guns were in their hands.

They swept the room with their glances and when they saw Athos in an *Oberleutnant's* uniform, standing coolly in the center of the room, surveying them with a cold questioning gaze, their arrogant confidence fell from them like a shabby coat.

Their jaws dropped and the guns in their hands wavered uncertainly.

"Well?" Athos said curtly. His voice was like the rasp of steel in winter and his eyes were scornful and arrogant. "What do you want?"

The Germans awkwardly shifted their guns to their left hands and saluted nervously.

"We are searching this section, *Herr Oberleutnant*," one of them said stiffly.

"By whose orders?" Athos asked.

"Colonel Rinehart has ordered a completely search of this neighborhood. A German has been found dead in an alley near here, stripped of all clothes and identification. The colonel thinks the slayers are in this area."

"Silence!" Athos said harshly. He glared angrily at the two confused Germans. "Are you presuming to tell me what Colonel Rinehart is thinking? What company are you from?"

"We are members of the 403rd from Berlin," one of the soldiers answered woodenly.

"I might have known," Athos said disgustedly. "That company has a reputation from one end of Europe to the

other for stupidity, incompetence, negligence and inefficiency. Get out of here! You are a disgrace to *der Fuehrer*!"

The soldiers flushed painfully and shifted from one foot to the other but they did not move.

"We have orders from the colonel to search this district," one of them said stolidly.

Phillip knew that Athos' bluff had failed. For a moment he had hoped it might work, but he knew enough of the German temperament to realize that these two soldiers would carry out their colonel's orders to the letter. And when he glanced furtively at Athos he saw that the musketeer knew it also.

"Very well," he said, shrugging, "get on with your work. Where is your Colonel Rinehart?"

"He is at the head of the block in a staff car," the German soldier said. "He is waiting for reports on the search."

"The head of the block? That is to the left, is it not?" Athos asked.

"Yes it is, *Herr Oberleutnant*," one of the soldiers answered respectfully, but Phillip noted a curious look on the man's face. "I thought the *Herr Oberleutnant* would know that," he said, and the curious expression on his face was slowly crystalizing to one of open suspicion.

"I am not interested in what you thought," Athos said, and his voice was like the crack of thin ice. "Must I remind you again that your job is not to think?"

His cold eyes dominated the German soldier. The man straightened and stared ahead, his face wooden.

"I am sorry, *Herr Oberleutnant*," he said.

Athos stared at the man for an instant and then turned to the door.

"I am going to pay my respects to the colonel," he said, "and tell him of

the oafs he has in his command. Although," he added bitterly, "I am sure he is aware of that."

HE OPENED the door, looked once at his three companions with a lingering, expressive glance, and then his boots sounded briskly on the wooden stairs.

The German soldiers waited until his footsteps had faded away before turning their attention to the others in the room. All of their initial arrogance had returned almost magically.

"Your papers!" one of them barked.

Phillip knew they would have to stall somehow, to give Athos a chance to get clear of the neighborhood. When the soldiers learned that none of them had papers, they would instantly mention the officer who had been in their company and a drag-net would instantly be thrown about the section.

He looked blankly at the two German soldiers.

"What?" he said. His voice was like an idiot's, slurred and dull.

"You heard me," one of the soldiers snapped. "Your papers!"

"Papers?" Phillip repeated vaguely. "Oh yes," he said, his face brightening, "papers." He looked down at the floor and frowned painfully. "We have so many," he said, shaking his head laboriously. "We have our identification papers," he said, holding up his fingers and ticking them off as he counted, "we have our papers for bread, for meat, for clothes, for shoes, for wine——" He paused and regarded the German accusingly. "Such a little wine you allow us."

"Stop babbling!" one of the soldiers shouted. "We want your papers, all of them."

"I have all of them but my tickets for bread," Phillip said slowly. "I lost those yesterday. I was coming from

work and when I paid my fare on the street car the bread ticket fell from my hand. It fluttered out the door. I asked the conductor to stop, but he said——"

"I don't care what he said," one of the soldiers roared. "If you don't produce your papers in ten seconds I will have you thrown in jail."

"Oh, that mustn't happen," Phillip said, "I will get them for you right away."

"We will get ours too," Aramis said. "We do not wish to go to jail. But I have lost my papers for procuring shoes. But there are no shoes in shops anyway, so I suppose it makes no difference."

"And I have lost my work identification," Porthos said unhappily. "My foreman is preparing a new one for me, but it is not ready yet."

"Silence, all of you!" one of the soldiers shouted. "We are not here to listen to an inventory of your losses. I have never seen such a collection of stupid, drooling, clumsy oafs."

PHILLIP was fumbling in his pockets.

"They should be right here," he said, frowning, "I always keep my papers. You never know when somebody is liable to ask to see them." He went through all of his pockets carefully, turning them inside out and staring with vague puzzlement at the flecks of lint that drifted to the floor. "I can't understand——" He looked up suddenly, his face suddenly bright. "How stupid of me," he cried. "I remember now. I took them from my pocket when I came in tonight. They are across the room under my bed. I will get them for you."

"Stand where you are," one of the Germans snapped. He motioned to his companion. "Get his papers," he ordered. "We have wasted enough time

here already. It is time for action."

The other soldier crossed the room and dropped to his knees beside the narrow cot.

"Where are they?" he asked, scowling at Phillip.

"Under the pillow," Philip answered, but when the German pulled aside the pillow, he suddenly cried, "No, forgive me, I have forgotten. They are at the foot of the bed, inside the mattress."

The soldier swore and turned to the foot of the bed. His nose wrinkled as he dug into the depths of the stale straw mattress. He fished about for several minutes.

Phillip slowly released the breath he had been holding. His whole body relaxed. He knew the game was up but he was also sure that Athos was out of the immediate section by now.

The soldier turned from the bed, his face ugly.

"There are no papers here," he said.

"So!" the other soldier cried, "you have been lying to us."

He stepped forward quickly, drew back his hand and slapped Phillip stinging across the mouth. Porthos moved forward instinctively, his great hands clenching, an angry rumble in his throat, but the German swung his gun to cover him.

"Stand where you are!" he said icily. "I would like to shoot you. It would please me if you give me the chance."

He stared angrily, bitterly at the three men.

"You have tried to make fools of us," he snapped. "You will regret that, I promise you."

His comrade was standing by the bed and there was a helpless, sick expression on his face.

"The *Oberleutnant*," he said weakly. "He was with them."

The two Germans looked at each other and their eyes were apprehensive

and filled with sudden terror.

"If he was an imposter," one of them said feebly, "we shall be on our way to the Russian front by this time tomorrow."

Aramis chuckled softly.

"I hope you gentlemen like cold weather," he murmured.

"Your friend will not get far," one of the Germans said. "And you," he added, smiling sadistically, "will go no further than the nearest concentration camp."

He gestured to the door with his gun.

"March out with your hands over your heads," he ordered. "Colonel Rinehart will wish to talk with you. And that," he added grinning with ugly bitterness, "is as close as you can come to hell before you die."

CHAPTER III

THE musketeers and Phillip spent that night in a dank cramped cell. The next morning, after a meager breakfast, a guard opened their cell door and ordered them into the corridor.

"Colonel Rinehart wishes to talk with you," he said. "Follow me. And don't try any tricks."

He led them up several flights of iron stairs, down a long corridor and finally stopped at a huge door that was guarded by a squad of back-clad soldiers of the Elite Corps.

The guard knocked and the door was opened by a small black-haired orderly.

"Have them come in," he said.

The room was huge, decorated in white, and the sun was pouring in from several windows. A huge swastika hung at one end of the office and before this was a large desk.

A man was seated behind the desk.

He glanced up when the prisoners filed into the room. He smiled and leaned back in his chair.

"Step up closer, please," he said pleasantly. "We are civilized human beings, and it is easier to talk without having to shout to be understood."

Phillip stopped several feet from the desk, Aramis at his right, the hulking Porthos at his left. He had a good opportunity to study Colonel Rinehart at close range.

The colonel was a man about forty, of medium height, thin and spare. His skin fitted his skull without a wrinkle. His hair was graying at the temples; his eyes were a deep shade of blue. He wore a monocle that seemed almost part of his face. When he smiled, hard sharp white teeth were visible under thin lips. An indication of the man's character was evident in the painfully neat desk, the ordered appearance of everything in the room. A rack of fine gleaming fencing foils hung against one wall, but it was the only thing that broke the stark cold design of the office. And even the gleaming steel foils seemed to fit into the icily sharp order of the room.

THE colonel was leaning back in his chair regarding them smilingly.

"You may relax, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "If you care to smoke, there are cigarettes on my desk. There is no reason why any of us should be uncomfortable." He leaned forward and placed his elbows on the shining surface of the desk. "You will find that I am not quite the ogre I am painted to be. I am a reasonable man, fair and just, I think, but on occasion I can be firm." He pronounced the last word with a peculiar emphasis. "Now," he said, picking a typewritten sheet of paper from the desk. "I have here a complete report on you

gentlemen. Complete, that is," he smiled, "as far as it goes. You are probably part of the underground movement that is operating in France. That much we know. You will probably be deported to concentration camps on my recommendation. However," he said, leaning back again in his chair and placing his fingertips carefully together, "I would very much like to have the name and description of the man who was masquerading as a German officer and whom my stupid soldiers allowed to slip completely away from them. For that information I would be willing to pay considerable. In fact," he smiled slowly, "I would even order that you three be sent to one of the more pleasant and livable camps in France where you would be granted certain special privileges that would make life more endurable. But if you are not willing to cooperate with me I shall have to be firm.

He paused and watched them carefully.

"I might order you shot immediately," he said softly, "or I might have you tortured a few weeks until you tell me what I wish to know. I have no desire to resort to either of these alternatives. I hope I can be lenient with you. But it is up to you gentlemen. The matter, you can see, is out of my hands. What will your choice be?"

The silence that followed the colonel's words was broken by a sharp rap on the door. The orderly opened the door and an instant later strode to the colonel's desk, a paper in his hand.

"This just arrived, *Herr* Colonel, from the Central Headquarters in Berlin." He laid the paper on the desk in front of the colonel and withdrew.

The colonel's eyes flicked over the papers rapidly.

"Good," he murmured. "Excellent."

He put the paper carefully to one side and glanced up at the men facing him.

"Well, gentlemen, have you made up your minds?"

He stood up and walked slowly around his desk.

"I am not trying to hurry you," he said. "Think the matter over. Talk it over if you like. I am, you will find, a most reasonable person."

HE STROLLED to the rack of foils, selected a gleaming sword from the case and, holding it at hilt and tip, bent it double. When he released the tip the sword straightened like a live thing, quivering delicately.

"Excellent steel," Aramis murmured.

"You are a good judge," Colonel Rinehart smiled. "Swords are a hobby of mine. I was fortunate enough to win the fencing championship of the Imperial army last year with the very blade I hold in my hand. Do you like swords?"

"Very much," said Aramis.

"You are wise," Colonel Rinehart said. "A true blade is like a true friend."

"But one must know how to use the blade," Aramis said.

The colonel smiled.

"One must know how to use friends also," he murmured.

He strolled toward them holding the sword carelessly.

"Nazism is like a sword," he said. "Hard, bright and effective. It is not hampered by sentiment or morals. It does its work thoroughly, quickly." He smiled. "Am I being too loquacious?"

"No," Aramis said thoughtfully, "but I think your simlie is inaccurate."

He had turned slightly to face the colonel and while his plump body was

relaxed carelessly there was an expression in his light blue eyes that was as challenging as a clenched fist.

"Yes?" the colonel said. "And how so?"

The smile had left his face.

"A sword by itself is nothing," Aramis said. "It needs someone to wield it. And its success is determined only by the skill of the user." He smiled quietly. "When the sword of the dictator strikes the sword held by a free man there can only be one result."

"I agree with that," the colonel said, "but I think we disagree on what the result is likely to be." He smiled and handed the hilt of his sword to Aramis. "I know you are too wise to attempt anything foolish. My orderly has a gun and there are a dozen men within sound of my voice. I know I'm taking no chance in letting you feel the balance of this blade. It is good, yes?"

Aramis flexed the sword and nodded his head.

"Yes, it is excellent," he said. "I am not sure that I ever held a better blade in my hand."

The colonel smiled and took another blade from the rack.

"Carrying on our little simlie," he said casually, "let us suppose for the moment that you represent the forces of what you term free men. And let us further suppose that I symbolize the power of absolute dictatorship. We are facing each other, swords in hand." The colonel shifted slightly and his sword rose to guard position. "Now," he said, and his voice was suddenly mocking, "do you see the stupidity of your statement?"

Aramis shifted his sword to a guard position, almost touching the colonel's, and he smiled coldly.

"I'm afraid I can't," he said.

"You are blind, then," the colonel snapped. "You have the better blade,

you represent free men, but I, with an inferior weapon, could run you through within five seconds."

PORTHOS suddenly laughed his rumbling laugh and stepped away from Aramis' side. He waved to Phillip.

"Step aside, little comrade," he said.

Aramis had not taken his eyes from the colonel.

"You are very sure of yourself," he said. The quivering tip of his blade lightly touched the colonel's foil. "Supposing you prove your point. I will count five for you, my boasting friend."

The colonel flushed angrily.

"You may not have the chance," he said.

He moved forward, his legs slightly crouched. The blade in his hand suddenly moved like something alive, flashing in a tight arc about the tip of the musketeer's sword and then driving like a striking snake.

Aramis whipped his sword back with the same speed and steel rang on steel as the colonel's thrust was parried.

"One!" Aramis counted slowly.

The colonel lunged in again and the force and power of his drive forced Aramis back a step, but again his deadly stroke was countered.

"Two!" Aramis said.

The colonel didn't pause to study his opponent. With superlative footwork he advanced inexorably, driving Aramis slowly across the wide room; but he held his lunge, waiting for an opening.

Their blades rang together with a steady crashing roar as they fought across the room. Sparks flew from their flashing swords and still the colonel continued to advance.

Porthos glanced worriedly at Phillip.

"The colonel is no amateur," he

muttered. "It would be better if Athos or D'Artagnan were facing him."

Aramis was fighting with his back to the wall. A bead of sweat broke on his forehead, but his eyes were cool as he fought desperately against the colonel's lightning-fast blade.

The colonel's mouth was parted slightly and his breathing was coming faster. A glittering intensity shone in his eyes as he struck and struck again—crashing vainly against the defense of Aramis' skillful blade.

And finally his moment came!

His feint drew Aramis out of position, leaving his side exposed.

"Now!" he cried.

He lunged forward, his blade striking out like the forking tongue of a snake; but Aramis ducked under the thrust, escaping it by a hair's breadth.

The colonel's blade struck the wall and Aramis leaped free, swinging about instantly, snapping his sword into a guard position.

"Three!" he said, smiling coolly.

THE colonel wheeled from the wall and drove into Aramis again, using an overhead saber stroke in a slashing, chopping swing.

Aramis blocked the cut and the swords crashed the length of the blades and locked at the hilt. The colonel threw his weight against his sword to hurl Aramis back, but the musketeer countered the move with his own weight—and the two opponents came together, grim-lipped, face-to-face, over the angle formed by their locked blades.

"Four!" Aramis said tensely. "You have but one more chance, Colonel."

"It will be all I need," Colonel Rinehart cried, panting heavily.

He lunged again, almost blindly and Aramis turned his blade away with a flick of the wrist.

"Five!" Aramis said.

He began a cautious advance, circling the colonel to the left but he was smiling confidently.

Perhaps that was why the colonel's sudden attack caught him off guard. One instant the colonel had been retreating slowly, but then he lunged to the left and back again to the right with lightning speed.

Aramis wheeled but his foil, whipping back to cover his side, was caught squarely by the slapping downward stroke of the colonel's blade.

And it flew from Aramis' hand in a spinning arc and struck the floor ten feet away with a metallic clatter.

The colonel's orderly grinned triumphantly.

"Excellent!" he cried.

The colonel's blade-tip was grazing the front of Aramis' shirt.

"You are an accomplished swordsman," he said. "Allow me to salute you. But I am going to teach you a little lesson that you will remember the rest of your life, particularly," he smiled coldly, "when you gaze into a mirror."

His sword-tip flicked up to Aramis' face and poised there, a fraction of an inch from his cheek.

"I," the colonel said, speaking slowly and deliberately, "am going to cut a swastika on each side of your face to remind you that the free man never wins against the logical forces of dictatorship. I have already proven that point to you; now I shall impress it upon you indelibly."

Aramis met the colonel's eyes coolly.

"This is quite superfluous," he murmured. "I am already completely humiliated." He sighed heavily and shook his head. "I wouldn't mind so much if you were actually a good swordsman, but of course you are far from being even mediocre. Losing is

bad enough—but to lose to an incompetent butcher is really quite annoying."

"You can't anger me that way," the colonel smiled.

Phillip watched in horror as the colonel's sword moved closer to Aramis' face.

"Wait!" he cried. "You can't do that."

"I beg your pardon," the colonel murmured, "but if you watch a moment you will see that I can."

HIS blade moved again, but just as its tip grazed Aramis' cheek there was a sudden knock on the door.

"See who that is," the colonel said over his shoulder to his orderly. "And send him away, whoever it is."

The orderly answered the door and turned to the colonel.

"I'm sorry, *Herr* —"

"Fool!" the colonel blazed, "I told you to send whoever it is away."

The door was thrust violently open, almost knocking the small orderly off his feet, and a tall slim young man strode arrogantly into the room.

"I am not accustomed to waiting rooms," the new arrival said curtly. He glared about the room and his eyes centered on the colonel and Aramis.

"Am I to report to *Herr* Goebbels," he said scathingly, "that Colonel Rinehart of Paris has nothing better to do with his time than practice fencing lessons on defenseless prisoners?"

The new arrival was tall, wide-shouldered, and he moved with the lithe grace of a jungle cat. His peaked officer's cap shadowed his face, but his eyes, flashing and hard, were like twin diamonds.

Colonel Rinehart lowered his blade slowly and faced the young man. His face was hard with suppressed rage.

"At whose orders do you break into my offices?" he demanded.

"I am from the Ministry of Information," the young man snapped. "*Herr* Goebbels has sent me here to escort three prisoners back to Berlin for intensive questioning. I wish to leave immediately." He whipped a sheaf of papers from his pocket and handed them curtly to the colonel. "My authorization and identification."

The colonel glanced at the papers and the anger faded from his face. A worried, nervous frown collected over his eyes.

"Why does *Herr* Goebbels want the prisoners questioned in Berlin?" he asked.

"I did not ask Doctor Goebbels the reasons behind his orders," the young man said sarcastically. "But after my insight into the strangely juvenile operation of your office, Colonel, it is not difficult to hazard a guess. *Herr* Goebbels wants the job done efficiently, and he doubtless realizes that that would be a literal impossibility under your bungling direction."

Colonel Rinehart sucked in his breath sharply and his cheeks flushed angrily.

"You will pay for your insulting attitude," he stormed. "I refuse to release these men until I have talked to your superiors."

The young man gestured sharply to the orderly.

"Get Doctor Goebbels' office on the wire immediately," he said crisply.

"Yes sir," the orderly said. He started for the phone.

"Wait!" the colonel said. His voice had changed. "There is no necessity for our being hasty. We mustn't bother *Herr* Goebbels with anything so trivial as our slight misunderstanding. I am sure we understand each other. Perhaps I was a bit hasty, and for that I'm sorry."

"Good!" the young man said. "Now, where are these men?"

"These three in the room are the ones referred to in your authorization," the colonel said.

The young man glanced from Porthos to Phillip and finally to Aramis. Then he shook his head disgustedly.

"A miserable looking group," he said.

He took off his peaked, swastika-emblazoned cap and ran a hand through his brown curly hair. His features were youthful and handsome and there was a curiously humorous glint in his brown eyes, as if he might be struggling to keep from laughing.

Phillip heard Porthos draw a sudden sharp breath; and then Phillip recognized the slim, brown-haired young man in the Nazi officer's uniform and his heart began to beat with a fierce, frantic excitement.

For the mocking, insolent young man who stood nonchalantly facing the colonel was the cavalier Gascon from Artagnan — the bold, cheerful, danger-loving young man who had led the musketeers through their most glorious exploits and whose sword and name had been known in every corner of France.

He was *D'Artagnan*!

CHAPTER IV

WITH an effort Phillip fought back the exclamation of astonished recognition that almost burst from his lips. He forced an expression of blank indifference over his face.

Colonel Rinehart said, "Must you be leaving right away?"

"Yes," *D'Artagnan* said emphatically, "time is of the essence. I must get started immediately."

"You will require a guard, of course," Colonel Rinehart said.

"That won't be necessary," *D'Artagnan* said. "I have my own men in the staff car. I assure you they will be more than sufficient."

"As you think best," Colonel Rinehart said. "I am sorry you couldn't stay longer. Will you please give my regards to Doctor Goebbels when you see him?"

"Why, yes, I'll be happy to," D'Artagnan said.

"You won't forget the name? Rinehart. Colonel Rinehart. I've met *Herr* Goebbels several times but I doubt if he would remember me."

"We'll refresh his memory then," D'Artagnan smiled. "Now the name was Rinewold, wasn't it?"

"Rinehart," the colonel said, with just a tinge of desperation in his voice.

"I won't forget," D'Artagnan said. "Rinehart, Major Rinehart — that's easy enough to remember."

"Colonel Rinehart," the colonel said.

"Ah, yes, I have it now," D'Artagnan said. "And now I must be getting along." He nodded to Porthos, Aramis and Phillip. "Come along, you three."

D'Artagnan paused at the door while his three comrades filed through ahead of him. He glanced back at the colonel, smiling.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Colonel Rinehead," he said. "I shall see that Doctor Goebbels hears of you."

"The name is Rinehart," the colonel said.

But the door of his office had already closed on D'Artagnan's smiling face.

D'Artagnan led his charges through the lobby of the building to the street where a high-powered Imperial staff car was waiting at the curb, a driver and a guard seated in the front.

The guard sprang out and opened the door when D'Artagnan appeared.

"Thank you," D'Artagnan said, climbing into the tonneau. Phillip, Aramis and Porthos clambered in after him and seated themselves in the comfortable rear compartment.

Porthos began to chuckle, his great

shoulders shaking with his mirth until the car was rocking on its springs.

"Gascon, you will be the death of me yet," he managed to gasp between chuckles. "I——"

"You will be the death of all of us," D'Artagnan said curtly, "if you don't control yourself." He leaned forward and opened the glass that separated the front and rear tonneau. "Drive us to the Metropole hotel," he directed the driver and closed the glass partition.

"You are my prisoners," he said quietly to his three companions. "You must try and act like it until we leave the shadow of the commandant's office. The driver and guard are underground workers, them we can trust." He glanced out the rear window. "I'm not too sure I fooled the colonel," he muttered. "He may decide to have us trailed."

BUT they turned a corner and no car had pulled away from the commandant's building. D'Artagnan turned around and stared at his three companions, but not for long could he keep his features solemn. A smile broke over his good-natured handsome face and he chuckled aloud.

"Well, that was like old times, comrades," he grinned. He slapped Aramis and Porthos on the thighs and winked at Phillip. "Just like old times. These two horse thieves in danger of losing their heads and Gascon D'Artagnan, the faithful friend, there to save them in the nick of time."

"Your dramatic entrance," Aramis said dryly, "was almost too late this time. Your timing is slipping. That pig was ready to carve when you arrived."

Porthos laughed hugely.

"You should have come earlier," he said, slapping D'Artagnan on the back. "Aramis received a dueling lesson from the colonel that would have made your

sides ache from laughing."

"There was nothing funny about it, I can assure you," Aramis said gloomily. "That man is a demon with a sword in his hands. I doubt if even Athos could stand against him."

D'Artagnan pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"He must be good," he said. He looked up suddenly. "Where is Athos?"

Aramis told him what had happened as quickly as possible.

"We must try and get in touch with him immediately," D'Artagnan said. "We need him."

"Do you have any plans?" Porthos asked.

"Only vague ones," D'Artagnan said. "We arrived from Africa only a week ago. I learned through the underground of your capture last night. They provided me with this uniform and the authorization for your custody."

"You say 'we'?" Porthos asked, frowning. "Do you have a tape worm?"

"You resemble the elephant in everything but memory, Porthos," D'Artagnan grinned. "Don't you remember the lovely girl with the flaming red hair we encountered in America?"

"Ah! Yes," Aramis said. "I have never forgotten."

"We are still working together," D'Artagnan said. "She is at the Metropole hotel and will be glad to see all of you. But we can't waste much time now. Any minute I am liable to be apprehended. We must find new quarters, obtain new papers immediately."

PHILLIP cleared his throat.

"I noticed something in the colonel's office that might be interesting," he said. "Do you remember when the orderly brought the paper into the colonel, while he was questioning us?"

Aramis nodded. "I remember."

"While you were dueling the colonel,"

Phillip continued, hunching forward on the seat, "I took the opportunity to glance at that paper. It was an order of confinement for two French scientists, Lenier and Bordeaux. They are in custody now, but they are being transferred to a place called the Mont Chateau under the personal supervision of Colonel Rinehart."

D'Artagnan shrugged and studied Phillip with his keen friendly eyes.

"And how does that affect us?" he asked.

"Lenier and Bordeaux," Phillip explained, "were specialists on U-235. I remember reading that much while in America. The Germans were desperately anxious to have Lenier and Bordeaux continue their experiments on behalf of the Third Reich. Both men refused and were sentenced to concentration camps."

"What is this U-235?" D'Artagnan asked.

"I don't know much about it," Phillip answered, "but it is a potential source of energy derived from an isotope of Uranium."

D'Artagnan grinned and shook his head.

"We'll have to take your word for that. Go on."

"The successful conversion of Uranium into U-235 has been the big problem. Lenier and Bordeaux were making great progress in that field and, at one time, believed that they had actually solved the problem. Naturally the Nazis want them to use their science to aid them in producing U-235. With U-235 the Nazis would be completely assured of energy to run their planes, ships, trains and tanks. They would no longer need oil." Phillip paused and studied the musketeers with serious eyes. "My guess is that they are going to make a last, desperate effort to make Lenier and Bordeaux co-operate with

them. If they succeed it will be a crippling blow to the Allied nations."

D'Artagnan nodded slowly.

"We must prevent that," he said decisively. He frowned. "We must find out where this Mont Chateau is, first. That's where they're being transferred, right?"

"Yes, that's the place," said Phillip. "And they are going to be under the personal custody of Colonel Rinehart."

Aramis scowled blackly.

"That butcher will plan something unpleasant for the French scientists, you may count on that."

"Marie knows Paris well," D'Artagnan said suddenly. "Possibly she knows the location of this Mont Chateau." He glanced out of the window. "We will be at the hotel soon. We must waste no time if we intend to snatch Lenier and Bordeau from the hands of the Nazis."

Porthos grinned contentedly.

"This has the sound of adventure, comrades."

D'Artagnan nodded grimly.

"It may not all be enjoyable, though," he said quietly.

CHAPTER V

WHEN they drove up to the canopy of the Hotel Metropole, the guard in the front seat climbed out and strode into the lobby.

"Just a precaution," murmured D'Artagnan, as they waited his return. "He will see that things are all right lest we stick our necks into a noose."

In a few moments the guard was back and it was instantly apparent from his tight worried features that something was wrong.

He opened the rear door and leaned close to D'Artagnan.

"The Gestapo have caught up with us," he said tensely. "They have Marie

in the lobby now, questioning her. You've got to get out of here."

"Not without Marie!" D'Artagnan snapped. "Come, comrades, this is a job for us."

"You can't go into that lobby," the guard insisted desperately. "They're waiting for you. They know Marie has an accomplice and they know he dressed as a German officer. Step through the door and you'll be a dead man."

"I have been told that before," D'Artagnan said coolly, "but I am not dead yet." He stuck a leg out the door of the car. "Is anyone coming with me?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Wait," Phillip said anxiously. Stay here, D'Artagnan. Porthos and I will go in. They won't be expecting us. They don't know us by sight. You keep the motor running. When we come back out we'll have Marie with us, but we'll be in a hurry."

"That is excellent," Porthos said cheerfully. He shoved D'Artagnan gently aside with one huge hand. "Little Phillip and I will handle this."

Phillip climbed out of the car after Porthos.

D'Artagnan watched them worriedly.

"I think I had better go, too," he muttered.

"That won't be necessary," said Phillip. "In fact, your presence would ruin things for Porthos and me. Just be ready to leave when we return."

He turned and, with the lumbering Porthos at his side, walked into the lobby of the hotel. He spotted Marie instantly. She was standing between two heavy-set men who were watching the main door closely. They were standing directly in front of a pillar which was flanked by two huge palms.

"Walk straight ahead," Phillip said from the side of his mouth to Porthos. "We must come up on them from the rear."

They continued straight ahead and the two Gestapo agents after a brief glance at them, turned their attention back to the door.

Phillips didn't know whether or not Marie had recognized them. Her eyes had met his for a flickering instant, but had turned away immediately.

Phillip stopped when the angle of the pillar hid them from the Gestapo agents. The desk clerk was watching them suspiciously and Phillip knew they would have to act immediately.

He turned and walked swiftly to the right until he was behind the pillar. He was only a half dozen feet from the girl when he stopped.

He whispered to Porthos, "I will step in front of the pillar and draw their attention." He smiled and patted the giant musketeer on the arm. "You know what to do. Luck."

Porthos grinned.

"This is becoming a specialty of ours."

PHILLIP nodded and then, erasing all expression from his face, he strolled calmly around the pillar to the side of the Gestapo agent who stood on Marie's left.

The agent glanced at him suspiciously.

Phillip paid no attention to the man, but stood calmly at his side, rocking slightly on his heels and whistling tunelessly.

The agent tapped his arm sharply.

"Move on," he growled. "You are in the way."

Phillip turned slowly and regarded the man with polite surprise.

"In the way?" he repeated, frowning in obvious puzzlement. "In whose way, may I ask?"

From the corner of his eyes he saw Porthos moving like a great shadow

around the other side of the pillar. He didn't risk a look at Marie. He was afraid his eyes would give him away if he did.

"You are in *my* way," the agent snapped. "If you don't want trouble, get along."

The agent on the other side of Marie stepped to his companion's side. He stared with icy suspicion at Phillip.

"What is the matter?" he demanded in a thick guttural voice.

"Nothing," Phillip said calmly. "If you gentlemen don't wish me to stand here I certainly won't."

They were both facing him now and over their shoulders Phillip saw Porthos come slowly into view around the pillar. He moved with the stealth of a great cat past Marie, his eyes fixed on the necks of the two Gestapo agents.

"Get moving!" the heavy-voiced agent snapped.

"With pleasure," Phillip smiled. He made a move to turn and then said politely, "Do either of you German dogs have a match?"

The two agents stared at him as if they doubted their ears, while angry blotches of color coursed into their faces.

"You French swine!" one of them cried in a strangling voice. "You shall pay for your insolence."

The both started toward him, but before they could take a step, Porthos' great arms were suddenly about their necks. Their shocked cries were cut off instantly by the pressure of his grip. The giant musketeer spread his legs to give him leverage and then suddenly jerked their heads together with terrific force.

The sound as their heads banged together was like the cracking of a rotten nut.

Marie stepped quickly to Phillip's side.

"Thank God, you came," she said. "Where is D'Artagnan?"

"He is outside," Phillip said quickly. "We've got to get out of here."

Porthos stretched the two Gestapo agents on the floor.

"Let's go," he said.

THE three started across the lobby lobby toward the door, but they hadn't covered a dozen feet before a shout sounded behind them. The desk clerk was yelling frantically at a puzzled-looking German soldier who was standing negligently beside the door.

"Stop them!" the desk clerk cried. He had evidently seen what had happened.

The soldier straightened up, his face losing its dullness.

He stepped in front of Porthos.

"One minute," he said sharply.

Porthos didn't bother to answer. His mallet-like fist snapped out from his shoulder, exploding on the point of the German soldier's jaw. The man went down in a crumpled heap.

Phillip charged through the door, dragging Marie with him.

D'Artagnan threw open the rear door of the car, and the driver gunned the motor.

Porthos was last through the door. Phillip helped Marie into the tonneau, jumped in behind her and helped haul Porthos onto their laps as the car roared away from the curb with lurching, screeching speed.

There were five in the rear of the car but they managed to straighten themselves out as the car sped through the practically deserted streets of Paris.

Marie, eyes shining, red hair streaming in the breeze, turned and impulsively kissed Aramis, Porthos and Phillip.

"It's wonderful to see you again,"

she cried. She turned anxiously to D'Artagnan. "The Gestapo is after us now, my Gascon. They trailed the underground worker who brought you the Nazi uniform. We've got to get out of Paris for a while."

"We have a job to do first," D'Artagnan said. "Do you know where the Mont Chateau is?"

"The Mont Chateau?" repeated Marie. Her fine arched brows drew together in a faint frown. "I have heard of it," she said. "I think it is a castle on the northern outskirts of the city. Yes," she said, nodding decisively, "I'm sure that's it. It is being used as quarters for several high-ranking Nazi officers. Why do you ask?"

D'Artagnan grinned.

"Because, my pet, the Mont Chateau is our next stop."

He told her quickly of their plan to free the French scientists, Lenier and Bordeau, and when he finished, her eyes were glowing with excitement.

"That would be wonderful," he cried. "If we can accomplish that it matters not whether we live or die. That would be worth dying for. I'll give the driver the directions. We can be there in a hour or so."

"We'll wait until darkness to enter the castle," D'Artagnan said.

Aramis asked, "How will we get into the place?"

"Getting in shouldn't be too difficult," D'Artagnan said thoughtfully. "But," he continued with a wry grin, "we may find getting out considerably more of a problem."

CHAPTER VI

WHEN night fell on the blacked-out section of the environs of Paris where Mont Chateau was located, a slowly moving German staff car approached the gates that guarded

the great vast bulk of the castle and came to a stop.

Sentries sprang immediately from the darkness, but their air of challenging truculence faded when they peered into the tonneau and met the cool eyes of a slim young man wearing the uniform of a high-ranking Nazi.

"Will you have the gate opened, please?" the young man asked. "We are expected."

The sentry stared from the young man to the girl and the huge man who sat on either side of him.

"All of you, *Mein Herr?*" the sentry asked.

"Naturally. Open the gates!"

There was a crisp snap of authority in the young man's voice and the sentries saluted and faded back into the darkness. Their voices sounded and in a few moments the great metal barrier creaked noisily open.

Phillip, seated beside Aramis in the front seat, breathed a sigh of relief.

"So far, so good," he muttered.

He released the clutch and the car slipped slowly through the gates and into the dark lane that wound through the grounds of the estate to the great castle known as Mont Chateau.

They drove on for several hundred yards in silence until Phillip saw the castle ahead of them, looming ominous and huge against the dark night.

He brought the car to a quiet stop.

The grounds of the castle were dark and silent, except for the cold whispering wind in the trees. And faintly they could hear the tramp of sentries patrolling the estate.

"What now?" Phillip whispered. "We can't stay here much longer."

"We must separate," D'Artagnan said. "We have a better chance of liberating the Frenchmen that way. If one group of us is caught the other can still carry on. Marie and I will

make a frontal attack on the castle. We will enter boldly as befits a Nazi officer and his lady. Possibly we can use the same trick that we used in freeing you from Colonel Rinehart. Phillip, you, Aramis and Porthos must manage to force an entry to the castle somehow, and locate the cells or rooms where the French scientists are being held. We shall have to trust to the good Lady Luck, once we are inside."

Phillip put the car in gear and drove slowly toward the castle. He stopped long enough before the steps that led to the massive door to allow D'Artagnan and Marie to step out. Then he drove on again into the darkness. . . .

D'ARTAGNAN waited until the car's dark bulk had disappeared down the lane before knocking loudly on the solid heavy timbers of the door.

He gripped Marie's arm with his other hand.

"Courage," he said softly.

She met his eyes calmly.

"I am not afraid."

A moment later the massive door swung back, and a stocky, dark-haired soldier in a corporal's uniform stood in the doorway.

"Good evening," D'Artagnan said.

"The gate sentry mentioned another," the corporal said suspiciously. "Where is he?"

"In the car with the driver," D'Artagnan answered carelessly. He took Marie's arm and stepped through the door, brushing the corporal aside. He took off his outer coat and hat and handed them to the man.

"Will you please tell your commander that I am here?" he said. "My business is urgent."

The corporal looked down in helpless anger at the coat and hat in his hands and with a glowering face strode

away to disappear through a large door that led off the main hallway.

D'Artagnan glanced around appreciatively. The hall was wide and spacious, furnished in burnished mahogany that looked a thousand years old. A wide curving staircase led from the hall to the upper sections of the castle, and on the first landing a knight's armor gleamed dully in the gloomy light.

"Very nice," he murmured to Marie.

Marie shivered. "It's too dark and gloomy for me," she said.

The corporal returned. He looked at them impassively, but D'Artagnan noticed that a peculiar flush of excitement seemed to flush his cheeks.

"The commandant will see you immediately," he said. "Will you follow me, please?"

"Thank you," D'Artagnan said. He had the feeling that he was sticking his head squarely into a noose, but that couldn't be helped.

The corporal led them across the polished floor to two great doors. He opened one of the doors, stepped aside and bowed slightly.

"Will you please go in?"

D'Artagnan hesitated for a second. He searched the corporal's face but the man was staring directly ahead, standing at rigid attention. He shrugged philosophically and, taking Marie's hand in his, sauntered through the opening.

The room he entered was large, book-lined and not very well lighted by a chandelier that hung from the high arched ceiling.

D'Artagnan paused inside the door. The room seemed to be deserted; but he felt a strange, intuitive premonition that caused his muscles to tense instinctively.

A voice to his left said, "It's nice to meet you again, my young friend."

D'Artagnan turned slowly.

Standing to one side of the door, a grim smile on his hard, bitter face was Colonel Rinehart.

And in his hand he held a Luger that covered his visitors unwaveringly.

CHAPTER VII

D'ARTAGNAN studied Colonel Rinehart's bitter eyes and he knew that the Nazi was aware of his deception. He smiled and shrugged. "How do you, Colonel," he said. He glanced at the gun in the Nazi's hand and shook his head accusingly. "You weren't so inhospitable the last time we met."

Colonel Rinehart strolled forward, still smiling.

"You made a fool of me on that occasion," he said. "I admit that. My superiors were not very tolerant of my mistake. My career may have been hurt irreparably by my error in releasing three important prisoners to a counterfeit German officer. And that," he said, smiling coldly, "is why I am so happy to meet you again. I don't know why you walked straight into my arms, but I assure you I am most grateful."

He nodded over D'Artagnan's shoulder to the corporal who had entered the room.

"Take this young man down to the dungeon with the others," he ordered. There was a speculative light in his eye as he turned to Marie and studied her slim body and classic features carefully. He smiled thoughtfully. "You, my dear, will remain with me for a while. I will question you personally."

The corporal stepped close to D'Artagnan and jammed a gun into his back.

"Come with me," he growled.

"And by the way," the colonel said, as D'Artagnan was being led toward the door, "I wouldn't depend too much on

your friends. They have already been placed in custody by my guards."

"You are holding all the cards, it seems," D'Artagnan said quietly. "But let me give you one piece of excellent advice, Colonel Rinehart." His voice was suddenly like iron and his eyes flashed like rapiers in his lean face. "If you harm a hair of this girl's head, there won't be a place in hell deep enough to hide you from me. Remember!"

"You are hardly in a position to make threats," Colonel Rinehart said mockingly.

"Remember!" D'Artagnan said again with terrible emphasis.

The corporal's gun prodded him in the back and he stepped through the door. The corporal closed it and pointed ahead to a long, dimly lit corridor. "Straight ahead," he ordered.

D'Artagnan walked to the end of the corridor. The corporal unbolted a door and ordered him down a flight of winding iron steps that led to a vast, stone-walled room. When D'Artagnan reached the bottom of the steps the first sight that met his eyes brought to him a feeling of black despair.

For Aramis, Porthos and Phillip were lined against one wall, secured by thick leather straps that cut across their chests and legs, pinioning them helplessly to the massive stone wall.

THEY glanced up when D'Artagnan was prodded into the room and Aramis smiled faintly.

"Lady Luck has forsaken us for another swain," he said wryly.

"Welcome to our cheerful little group," Porthos said.

D'Artagnan was silent as the corporal forced him against the wall and jerked straps into place across his chest, pulling them up so tightly that he could hardly breathe. Another strap buckled securely around his knees and he was

bound helplessly—unable to move hand or foot.

The corporal sneered at the three helpless men.

"You will wish you were dead by this time tomorrow."

He turned, and they could hear him chuckling softly to himself as he mounted the winding steps.

"Well, comrades," D'Artagnan said, when they were alone, "this seems to be rather a tight spot."

He glanced about the room. Directly in front of them was a rectangular scaffolding and from the cross-bar iron manacles hung. The stone floor at the base of the scaffolding was spotted with brown stains. On the opposite wall was a rack of leather whips.

D'Artagnan raised one eyebrow ironically.

"The gentle Germans obviously use this place to introduce to their enemies the delights of the New Order," he said sarcastically.

Arranged about the room were other instruments of torture; and several heavy scimitars, sabers and swords were hung at intervals along the wall.

"Cheerful little place, isn't it?" Aramis said.

"We've got to get out of here," D'Artagnan said grimly. "Have any of you heard anything of the French scientists we came to liberate?"

"I heard one of the guards mention them," Phillip said. "They are imprisoned in a room upstairs."

D'Artagnan said, "Porthos, have you tried your strength against your bonds?"

"Yes," Porthos grunted, "but they are too stout. I can't get an inch of leverage."

They were silent for several moments and then they heard footsteps on the iron staircase. A moment later Colonel Rinehart stepped into the room. D'Ar-

tagnan noticed instantly that there was a long scratch on his right cheek. He looked to be in a towering rage.

Marie was dragged into the room after him by the swarthy corporal and another thick-set German soldier who wore the uniform of an Elite guardsman.

"String her up!" the colonel ordered savagely. His hand moved to the long, livid scratch on his cheek. "We'll see if a lashing will cool her spirit."

THE German soldier dragged the slim red-haired girl under the scaffolding, snapped the manacles about her wrists and pulled her arms above her head until the tips of her shoes were barely scraping the ground.

"Do with me what you like," she said quietly, "I have no information to give."

"We shall see if you don't change your mind after a while," the colonel said.

"Remember what I told you," D'Artagnan said softly, his eyes on the colonel's face.

"Naturally," the colonel smiled, "you wouldn't want the young lady hurt, She is attractive and full of life, her skin is so soft and white it would be a pity to ruin all that loveliness." He sighed and shook his head. "Yes, indeed, it would be a pity to use a leather whip on her bare back, and so unnecessary too. If any of you gentlemen care to become communicative we might be able to spare her the unpleasantness of having the skin lashed from her back. What do you say? Are you willing to start talking?"

"Don't tell him anything," Marie cried. "It doesn't matter what happens to me."

Colonel Rinehart smiled at the musketeers.

"Possibly you don't think I am serious," he murmured. "Maybe you think

I am only bluffing, that I wouldn't be so callous as to torture a helpless girl?" He stopped smiling and his face was stonily hard. "Let me assure you that I have no scruples. I will do what is necessary to get the information you possess, regardless of the means I must use."

He strolled to the wall and selected a light, delicately balanced sword and flexed it slowly, watching it snap and twist with idle, amused eyes.

"Perhaps a lashing wouldn't be quite dramatic enough," he murmured. "Maybe you would be more impressed if I displayed my skill with the sword on the person of the young lady."

He strolled slowly toward the scaffolding where Marie was hanging helplessly.

"Don't be nervous, my dear," he smiled. "I won't hurt you. Until I'm ready, that is," he added.

"Nothing you can do will make me talk," Marie said scornfully.

"It is gratifying to hear you say so," the colonel said mockingly. "I like people with spirit. The ultimate victory is much more satisfying when you feel you have faced a worthy opponent."

The sword in his hand suddenly struck forward like a snake, describing a flashing arc that no eye could follow. The point of the blade slashed across the girl's forehead, grazing the skin by a feather's width.

MARIE cried out instinctively and jerked back from the blade, the cords in her slender neck straining.

The colonel bent and picked up a lock of red hair from the floor. He held it out for the girl to see.

"You mustn't be alarmed," he smiled. "I just wanted to remove the lock of hair that had fallen over your forehead. I can, of course, come much closer."

He turned languidly to the musket-

eers, who were staring at him in open hatred.

"Are any of you gentlemen feeling talkative?"

D'Artagnan glared at him with blazing eyes.

"Give me a blade in my hand, you butcher, and I will make ribbons out of your carcass!"

The colonel smiled. "Your comrade had that chance; you would do no better than he. At the risk of sounding boastful, I consider myself the finest swordsman in the world today. That is why my little exhibition is going to be so interesting. I will not be crude when I start working on the young lady. She will be aware of every stroke, of every slice, of each separate cut, until the very last."

He turned back to the girl, the sword in his hand moving slowly.

Marie shrank back from the blade, staring at it with agonized fascination.

"But you are not to be alarmed!" the colonel cried mockingly. "You are not afraid of me, or what I will do. You have said so yourself. Courage, *Fraulein*, I will be delicate, I promise." His blade moved in a slow, deliberate arc as it neared her white, taut face. "You needn't fear a bungling job from the greatest swordsmen in the world."

There was a quiet laugh from the shadows at the far end of the room.

"You have said that twice, *mon ami*!" a cool voice said from the darkness. "Will you permit me the luxury of doubting you?"

The colonel had wheeled at the sound of the laugh, his eyes stabbing the darkness at the end of the room. He gestured sharply to his two soldiers.

"Draw your guns!" he snapped.

The swarthy corporal fumbled at his belt, then turned a red, guilty face to Colonel Rinehart.

"We left them upstairs," he stam-

mered. "We didn't think we'd need them."

"Fools!" the colonel shouted. "Arm yourselves! Take swords from the wall, both of you."

The men sprang to obey his order, while the colonel continued to stare nervously into the shadows.

"Worried, Colonel?" The pleasant voice from the shadows was gently mocking. "That isn't the proper attitude for the greatest swordsman in the world."

Porthos was staring at D'Artagnan with an incredulous expression of ecstatic relief on his broad face.

"Could it be possible?" he murmured under his breath.

D'Artagnan was staring at the dark end of the room, his face blazing with hope and excitement.

"It could be none other!" he cried.

THE shadows at the end of the room seemed to dissolve as a man walked slowly into the light. He was tall, with frank, open features, soft eyes and a generous, mobile mouth. A sword hung negligently at his side, incongruous with the coarse clothes he was wearing.

He bowed mockingly to the colonel and his eyes, strangely, were no longer soft. They were as hard as flint.

"At your service, Colonel," he murmured.

"Athos!"

Porthos cried the name out, his voice filled with exultant joy.

Athos turned slightly, smiled and nodded at the musketeers.

"Greetings, comrades," he said. He gestured negligently toward the colonel. "When I have split this Prussian pig on my blade I will release you, have no fear."

The colonel's blade suddenly flashed to a guard position. His pale, smooth

cheeks were flushed with bitterness.

"You filthy peasant," he sneered, "I will teach you the penalty for your insolence."

He motioned to the two soldiers who, beside him, blades drawn, faced Athos.

"Advance with me," he ordered. "I could cut the dog down myself, but I have not the time to waste."

Athos grinned as he drew his sword with a slow, deliberate motion.

"The greatest swordsman in the world requires two assistants to duel a French peasant," he said mockingly. "Well, perhaps you will need them."

The colonel stepped back a pace.

"Charge him!" he suddenly ordered his two soldiers.

They sprang forward at his command, swords driving at the cool young man who faced them.

Athos stepped forward, his sword flashed to the right, back to the left—steel rang on steel twice and the swords of the soldiers were suddenly flying through the air.

The soldiers stared stupidly, unbelievably, at their empty hands.

Athos' sword flicked under their noses.

"Back up, my clumsy oafs," he said, and he was not smiling. He nodded at the colonel. "It is your turn, *mon ami*," he murmured.

"Watch him carefully, Athos," Aramis counseled. "He bested me."

Athos smiled briefly.

"Not meaning to disparage you, my dear Aramis," he said, "but you were never a competent swordsman. If the good colonel musters up enough courage to fight, I will show you an example of superb dueling."

"Your modesty is overwhelming," Aramis said, shuddering.

COLONEL Rinehart moved forward slowly, his sword held carefully,

watching Athos with narrowed eyes.

Athos moved in and soon their swords touched, clashed and flicked away. The colonel drove in suddenly, but his sword was turned aside easily by Athos' blade. He drove in again, forcing Athos back a step, his sword flashing in wicked, skillful arcs as it fought to break through the other's defense.

"Excellent work," Athos commented.

"Excellent, that is, for a student of about nine."

His sword suddenly flashed under his opponent's guard and the tip slit the colonel's uniform from throat to waist. He drove again, forcing the colonel back three frantic steps, and his blade was dancing before the colonel's eyes like a snake about to strike.

"You realize," he said coolly, "that I can kill you anytime I choose?"

His blade flashed again, slashing across the colonel's cheek, drawing a thin line of blood. The colonel retreated again, his eyes pools of terror in the whiteness of his face. He fought desperately, wildly, against the flashing, blinding attack, but his eyes mirrored futility.

A line of blood was drawn on his other cheek, another on his forehead, as Athos' flicking blade slashed twice with incredible speed.

The colonel shouted frantically to his soldiers.

"Help me! Keep this demon away from me. Pick up your swords, you fools!"

The soldiers scrambled for their swords and then closed in on Athos again, forming, with the colonel, a semi-circle of steel.

Athos backed away slightly. He was at a serious disadvantage. If he tarried too long with any one antagonist, he would be leaving his side and

back exposed to deadly thrusts from the other two.

His eyes narrowed and his face set in hard, purposeful lines.

"You are forcing me to be abrupt," he murmured.

He sprang to one side. His leap brought the corporal closing in on his side. He swung back, dodged the corporal's clumsy thrust and ran his blade through the man's heart.

He had withdrawn the blade and was leaping for the second soldier before the corporal started to fall. The second soldier screamed—and his scream broke in a horrible gurgle as Athos' deadly blade pierced his throat.

Colonel Rinehart had lunged in, striking swiftly at Athos' unprotected side, but his blade cut through Athos' sleeve, missing his body by a scant inch.

He jerked the sword free with an oath and lunged again—and that was his last conscious act on this earth. Athos deflected the blade with a turn of his wrist and drove forward, his own blade stabbing deeply into the colonel's heart.

Rinehart twisted slowly and straightened in a last convulsive, agonized effort. His face was twisted with rage and pain as he glared for one dying instant at Athos. Then he fell heavily to the floor, pulling loose Athos' blade as he dropped.

Athos saluted him impassively with his red blade.

"You never had a chance, *mon ami*," he murmured; "but you didn't deserve one."

HE TURNED then, and quickly released the musketeers and Phillip.

D'Artagnan sprang to Marie's side and let her down from the scaffolding. He held her in his arms tightly for an instant.

"There is no time for that," Aramis said.

"You're right," Phillip agreed. "We've got to move fast. We must find Lenier and Bordeau and then try to get away from this place before these three dead Germans are discovered."

"We will make it without trouble," Porthos said. He laughed and slapped Athos on the back. "You were magnificent, comrade. I have never seen your blade quite so effective."

"How did you get here?" D'Artagnan asked quickly. "We thought you were in Paris."

"I was," Athos said. "I was watching the Paris office of Colonel Rinehart, hoping to be able to help Porthos, Aramis and Phillip, when I saw all of you emerge and drive away. I followed, but you had left the Hotel Metropole by the time I arrived. By making inquiries I was able to trace your car to this neighborhood. I slipped over a wall and made my way here. Fortunately I was able to force a window of the castle in time to send the good colonel to his final reward. That's all there is to my story."

"Let us hurry," Phillip said anxiously. "I think we had better arm ourselves with swords. We may have trouble yet."

The musketeers and Phillip quickly found weapons and then cautiously ascended the winding iron stairs. The corridor of the castle that led to the dungeon entrance was deserted.

"The French scientists are upstairs," Phillip said.

"Where is the car?" D'Artagnan asked.

"It is close to the front door," Phillip answered. "We were caught as we were driving away, but I am certain the car was left there in the driveway."

"Excellent," D'Artagnan said. "Ara-

mis and I will take over the little matter of freeing the French scientists. The rest of you go to the car and wait for us—with the motor running.”

“Be careful, please,” Marie said anxiously.

“I am always careful,” D’Artagnan grinned. “Come along, Aramis.”

Phillip waited until the two musketeers had started cautiously up the stairs, then, with the girl at his side and Athos and Porthos following closely, he led the way from the house to the dark lane where the staff car was still parked.

He started the motor and let it warm quietly.

They waited for several minutes in the darkness in silence. Their thoughts were all on the same subject and there was no need to speak.

The minutes stretched and dragged. The wait seemed interminable, but finally Porthos heard the scratch of a boot on gravel.

“Someone comes,” he whispered.

The next instant the door was flung open and D’Artagnan leaped into the car. Two nervous, white-faced figures crowded quickly in after him.

“Get in the front, Aramis,” D’Artagnan said breathlessly.

Phillip slipped the car into gear and before Aramis had seated himself, they were rolling toward the main gate.

“We had to kill the guards,” D’Artagnan said. “There will undoubtedly be quite a commotion shortly.”

He slapped one of the small men on the back.

“With luck, Monsieur Lenier or Bordeaux, whichever you are, we’ll be safe in another few minutes.”

“I am Monsieur Lenier,” the small man replied weakly. “God and France will bless you for what you have done tonight.”

“The devil won’t be displeased

either,” D’Artagnan grinned. “We’ve sent him a half dozen excellent additions to his staff.”

THEY were approaching the gate and Phillip saw a sentry standing in the road, waving them to a stop with a flashlight.

“Stop,” Porthos said suddenly. “Let me handle this.”

Phillip stopped the car. The heavy gate was shut and there was no way out unless the sentry ordered it opened.

“Come here!” Porthos bawled to the sentry.

The sentry approached the side of the car.

“No one is to leave,” he said crisply. “We have just received those orders from the castle.”

“What’s that?” Porthos said. “Don’t mumble, fool! Step closer so we can hear you.”

The sentry stepped to the side of the car and stuck his head into the rear tonneau. Porthos’ great hands closed over the man’s neck with the pressure of a vise. The sentry struggled for an instant, then was still.

The night was perfectly quiet.

“Of course everything is all right,” Porthos bellowed loudly. His voice carried far in the silence. “Your apologies are a little late, *Herr Dumkopf*. You will find that it is not conducive to your good health to question field marshals as if they were corporals. Have that gate opened within three seconds and no more of your stammering.”

The sound of the gate creaking open, broke the silence.

D’Artagnan grinned with delight at Porthos.

“I didn’t think you had that much deceit in that ox-like body of yours,” he whispered.

Porthos threw the body of the sentry

(Concluded on page 170)



I tested the machine
on several patients at
the point of death...

**IS this letter simply a matter of a
practical joke—or has time travel
become more than a writer's dream?**

Nov. 24, 2010
Mageditor Raymond A. Palmer
FANTASTIC ADVENTURES
540 North Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois
United States of America
Mageditor Palmer:

I AM sorry that it is necessary to
write this letter, my dear sir, but it
is my sad and solemn duty to in-

form you that three days after you re-
ceive this you will be dead. You will be
dead, Mageditor Palmer, because I am
going to kill you.

Let me tell you why.

I was born in New York City on
Nov—I believe you know it by its obso-
lete, full name of November 24, the
year of 1970, of very poor parents. My
father was a shoemaker, and my mother
was a cleaning woman. As a result, I



always wore old and shabby clothes, and when the 1986 government edict was issued outlawing the payment of tuition fees at any institute of learning and I took advantage of it by enrolling at the de luxe New York School of Specialized Sciences, the rich students snubbed me in a body.

I didn't have a single friend during the four years I spent at the school. They were the loneliest of my life. But

I had specialized in the study of electricity, and by the time I graduated, I knew my subject thoroughly.

That was all to the good—for when I got out of school, I made an important decision. I decided that I was going to become richer and more famous than any of the students who'd snubbed me—and that I'd do it by way of the subject I'd stuck to mastering despite their glacial attitudes. I took an unim-

portant job, and began to experiment and dig around the field of electricity in my spare time.

At school I had been fascinated by the theory that all life is electrical—and that death caused by “old age” came when one’s electricity ran out. There seemed to me to be a lot of truth in this idea. I got the thought that if this were so it would be possible to figure out the given amount of time in which a given amount of life-electricity was expended, and invent a clocking machine which would measure the electricity in a person, which would predict that person’s death to the minute.

I discussed my thought with several people, but they all scoffed.

“Don’t be silly,” they said. “Don’t you realize that some people bring their own deaths on early—by fast living, for example? And how about the people who don’t die of old age—deaths in accidents, for example?”

I was able to answer that. I told them that I thought life and death were planned—part of the cosmic scheme. I told them that I thought each person’s death was foredecided . . . that each person, frugally, was given exactly enough electricity to last out his span, no matter what his foredecided method of death. But they laughed and scoffed.

WELL, I got to work. I began with variations of all kinds of electrical testers. I paid a nurse at a charity hospital to permit me to work with dying sickness and accident patients, and with new-born babies. I paid old vagrants who were near death to allow me to experiment with them day by day. And finally, I hit it.

It took nearly ten years, but I emerged with a machine which could clock a person’s electricity and predict the exact moment of his death.

I began to test people, all kinds of

people—friends I’d make at my job, acquaintances, neighborhood curiosity seekers who’d heard about my work. Several of them didn’t have long to live, and in every case my machine predicted their death without a minute’s error.

And then one day, I tested a famous man—a neighborhood lawyer who’d risen to the position of Senator. He took the test more or less as a joke, mostly to please me because we’d known each other all our lives. But I remember that the blood left his face and his hands began to shake when I told him that he was going to die in exactly one week.

Later, he shook his feeling off as a momentary burst of silly superstitious fear, and he phoned all the New York newspapers about the occurrence. They all printed the story. They thought the incident very funny.

One week later the Senator died, following a sudden attack. His doctors agreed that heart failure was unusual in one so young, but then, they pointed out, the Senator had been a most active man.

The first thing that happened after this was that I was arrested, and a group of experts were assigned to investigate my machine. They found it harmless, which, of course, it was. I was released, and that began it. Hundreds upon hundreds of people, drawn by morbid curiosity, asked me to test them. When I predicted exactly the deaths of several other famous people, my own fame began to grow.

My prediction machine, which was really nothing more or less than a toy and a curiosity, was only the first. A number of rich men, attracted by the publicity, agreed to subsidize me, and I began to work on other inventions. One by one, I succeeded in bringing forth other inventions, several of them

greatly beneficial to medicine, and several greatly helpful to industry.

But as I became richer and richer, a curious thought began to bother me. I began to wonder about my own life span. I tried to fight the thought down, but it became stronger and stronger. I became tortured by the desire to know how long I would live.

I gave in finally. I sat down near the machine, attached the tester, and clicked the switch.

THE machine worked on a twin-pointer system. Before the test began, one pointer was placed on the hour, day, month, and year of birth, which was adjusted by twirling a series of dials listing the twenty-four hours thirty-one days, twelve months, and years of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Then you attached the tester to yourself, clicked the switch, and watched the second pointer move to the time of your death.

I felt my heart pounding hard against my ribs as I watched. And then, a strange thing happened.

The prediction pointer began to move. It moved toward the year of my birth—and then, to my bewilderment, it moved *past* it. It stopped at the year 1941—29 years before I was born!

I couldn't understand it. How could I possibly die in the year 1941, if I hadn't even been born until 1970?

At first I had the idea that possibly the machine had peculiarly human characteristics—that it could work for everyone but its creator. But I quickly discarded the idea. It was a machine, and when a machine did not work correctly, there was something wrong with it.

Again I resorted to sickness and accident patients who were near death, and every test showed the machine to be perfectly active. Then I tried the

machine on myself once more, and again it swung to 1941.

It was a question I could not answer. I locked the machine up, and never looked at it again.

Meanwhile, my fame continued to grow. When the President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt IV—great-grandson of the President during your time, by the way—created the new Cabinet position, Secretary of Science, he asked me to accept the position. I felt that it was a great honor, and gladly accepted.

It was one of my duties to check over new and promising inventions, for the purpose of choosing those which the government would subsidize. And that's how, one day I came upon the invention which was the beginning of the end for me. And, of course, for you, dear Mageditor Palmer.

IT WAS a machine which the inventor called a "time-traveler." The young man was able to prove conclusively that by entering the machine, which resembled a small elevator, he had been able to project himself fifty years into the future, and back. He had not yet tried to project himself into the past.

I wrote the young man, asking him to come to Washington at his earliest opportunity. That was a great pity, for he left on the next train. And through an engineer's carelessness, the train was derailed half-way through its trip—and the young man was among those killed.

The entire story reached the newspapers, and they made much of it. Public attention was aroused. I received thousands of letters pointing out how wonderful the machine would be for the purpose of going into the past and clearing up the many historical facts which were vague or completely lost to our civilization.

But now there was a problem. Some-

one would have to bell the cat, as it were. Someone would have to test the machine and see if it *could* go into the past.

Yes, Mageditor Palmer, you've guessed it. A week before this writing I was visited by a group of Senators and other officials, and told that, as the outstanding scientist of this age, I had been given the honor of making the test. They could see no danger in it. "After all," one of them said pleasantly, "if the machine goes forward, there would seem to be no reason why it can't go backward." The test was set for me to go back to 1865 and see if Lincoln was really killed by John Wilkes Booth, since historians from time to time have expressed some doubts about it.

I tried to protest, but it was no use. They insisted and continued to insist, until I finally had to give in. And I knew that when I did so I had signed my own death warrant.

I know perfectly well that when I reach the 1941 date my invention specified, the time-traveler is going to prove a failure and blow up or something of that sort, and I am going to die.

During this last week, out of the same sort of idle curiosity which first brought testees for my prediction machine, I investigated the past of the young man who invented the time machine—to see if I could find out where he got the idea for his invention. And do you know where he got it? He got the idea after reading a story about a time machine in an old issue of your magazine.

It may be that my ideas and thoughts have become distorted because of my fear of my oncoming death, but I have come to believe that it is all your fault. I believe that if it were not for you and your magazine, the time-traveler might never have been invented and, because of the peculiar date predicted for my death, I might somehow have continued

to live on and on.

So today, Mageditor Palmer, on the fortieth anniversary of my birth—this was a brilliant notion of one of the Senators—I begin the trip to my death. But, my dear sir, I'm going to see that you die, too.

I'm going to stop off in 1943 (November 6th, to be exact), get this letter to you, give you a few days to ponder on your fate and then take care of you. Then I'll continue on to my fate. I had thought for a while of remaining in 1943, but I worked too hard for success during my life to begin life over again.

I think that sums it up, Mageditor Palmer. Watch out for dark alleys!

Yours sincerely,

Head Scientist Scott Feldman

Secretary of Science

United States Cabinet

* * *

(Note by the editor: The foregoing letter was received on November 8, 1943, in an ordinary envelope postmarked November 6, 1943, Washington, D. C. We were struck by the letter as a good "gag" and decided to accept it and publish it as fiction in *Fantastic Adventures*.)

Accordingly we mailed a check to Scott Feldman, who is a well-known fiction writer, using the address in our files, since no return address appeared on the envelope, or the letter, other than that following the signature. Mr. Feldman is a resident of Brooklyn, New York. To our utter amazement, the check was returned.

Said Mr. Feldman: "I am at a loss to understand what the enclosed check is for. I sent you no manuscript entitled "Letter To The Editor". Apparently you have credited me in error with someone else's story. Naturally I was delighted to get a check from you people, but I'm afraid I can't take

credit for something I didn't do!"

Obviously the Scott Feldman who calls himself "Secretary of Science" is not the Scott Feldman who writes fiction. Who ever heard of an author returning a check! To date, we have been unable to find a Scott Feldman to present our check to.

All of which means very little—since the only thing we can do is wait until the real author of this bit of fiction comes forward to claim the check. We would appreciate his forwarding us his address so that we may balance our books on this issue.

But—and to your editor, this is a BIG but—the most fantastic of all the events concerning this mysterious "letter" happened on the evening of November 9, 1943 as your editor was leaving the offices at 540 North Michigan Avenue, in Chicago, at 9:30 P. M. after

a little overtime work getting a portion of this particular issue to the printer. As we left the building, a dark figure rushed at us from a darkened doorway. Instinctively we ducked, but only in time to partially deflect a blow to the head with some blunt instrument. We were dazed by the blow, and slumped down, but managed to grasp at our assailant defensively. Then we lost consciousness.

This morning we have two souvenirs of the attack—a large goose egg on the back of our skull, and a strange plastic button, of a material local chemists have been unable to positively identify!

We don't ask you to believe us—we can't believe it ourselves. But, earnestly, if Mr. Scott Feldman will come forward and admit that this is a gag, we will forgive all and gladly return the check which he so amazingly rejected!

★ FANTASTIC FACTS ★

HOME-GROWN CHROMIUM

ANOTHER essential war material once available only through importing has been promised us in an abundance from domestic sources. This is chromium. Through efforts of the United States Bureau of Mines, the home production of this metal is now assured.

In the past, we have depended upon New Caledonia, India, Turkey, the Philippines, and other foreign countries for the 600,000 tons consumed here annually. With imports cut off, the government has seriously turned its attention to America's own sources of supply.

We have numerous deposits of low-grade ores here, and the Bureau of Mines has attempted to extract the important mineral from these. Our sources of supply are high in iron and low in carbon content, and, until recently, it has been very difficult to separate them in order to obtain a ratio of at least three parts chromium to one part iron—the necessary relationship for the making of satisfactory alloys. The process developed by the Bureau of Mines has, however, found success in getting the ratio and has already reached as high a point as 30 and 40 to 1, instead of the meager 2 to 1 of former years.

* * *

FOLLOWING AN ELECTRIFIED PARTICLE

HAVE you ever wondered how it is possible for a scientist to trace the paths of electrons,

protons—namely, any charged particle no matter how small?

One of the most important and ingenious methods is the cloud-chamber method. By use of a cloud-chamber, the actual collisions of charged particles can be observed. It was by virtue of this all important cloud-chamber that the positron was discovered.

If we should rapidly expand a vessel containing saturated water vapor, a fog might take place only if there were something about which the water vapor could condense—say a nucleus of some sort—would we get our fog.

Suppose a stream of electrified particles were passing thru this vessel, let us analyze the results that these particles would produce. When electrified particles move swiftly through air, they seem capable of ripping off the electrons of the air molecules. This leaves a tell-tale path of ions behind the elusive electrified particles. Ions serve as good centers about which water vapor can condense, when a suitable expansion takes place in a chamber. Therefore, we would get a fog formed, where ions existed in a fog-chamber, confined to those tracks which the electrified particle had produced on its ion-forming journey. All we need do now, is to photograph the illuminated fog droplets and we have a picture of the direction taken by an electrified particle.

A "MUST" FOR YOUR DIET

DR. WILHELM BUSCHKE of the Johns Hopkins University recently reported the results of his very important experiment to the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology.

According to Dr. Buschke if a man's diet lacks tryptophane, one of the ten essential amino acids, he may be afflicted with baldness, cataracts of the eyes, bad teeth, and even sterility. This food chemical is found in such various animal foods as meat, fish, poultry, eggs, and milk and in a lesser degree in grains and cereals.

To test his theories, Dr. Buschke used rats and varied the amount of tryptophane in their diets. Those rats who were completely deprived of the food chemical developed baldness, cataracts, poor teeth, and destruction of the male sex glands. He also tried the experiment with humans and determined by chemical tests that they too were affected by the lack of tryptophane in their diet.

Dr. Buschke claims that if the diet were continued with humans as long as it was with the rats he used, they would also have become bald.

A diet lacking this food chemical affects various age groups among rats in different ways. Bad teeth and cataracts developed only among the young, growing rats while baldness and wasting sex glands resulted in all age groups. By putting tryptophane back into the diet, he was able to cure the baldness and cataracts.

* * *

SOCIAL STATUS IN THE ANIMAL WORLD

OBSERVERS of human activities have concluded that the function of competition is to fix the status of the contestants. In the animal world, too, it has been found this function may be applied. Who knows, but that your dog is a leader in his own "crowd" or that the alley cat you so disdainfully avoid is the "king" of all the alley cats?

It has been observed, for example, that there is a definite "pecking order" among hens when they are grouped. Thus, Hen A pecks Hen B, but the latter does not retaliate. Instead B pecks C, while C takes it out on D. Sometimes, through curious and unexplained circumstances, Hen D pecks back at Hen A. These pecking orders result from previous encounters where the relative prowess of the hens was determined. Open conflicts between hens, then, results in the establishment of a hierarchy of status.

In another study—of a flock of thirteen brown leghorn pullets—pecking order was more carefully observed. For 60 days, the pecks delivered and received were recorded. In the same manner, Hen M pecked all the other twelve hens, Hen L pecked eleven, Hen K pecked ten, and so down the "social ladder." But at Hen F, an irregularity occurred. She pecked at Hens A, B, C, and E, while the next hen down, Hen E, pecked at Hens A, B, C, and F. These slight interruptions in the scale occur, say the observers, because of some accident or another.

Hen E may have met Hen F for the first time on one of F's off days, gained an advantage in the encounter, and retained it with the aid of the psychological dominance thus established.

A similar hierarch of status has been observed among the baboons. The stronger male baboons build up harems of females which they protect from the weaker males. Just as in the case of the hens, leadership is established by earlier physical combat among the males.

Very often, too, size plays an important factor in settling status disputes. The bigger animals have an advantage over the smaller, and since males are usually larger than females, they hold a higher rank in their particular society. Cockerels, for example, prevail over hens in pecking order.

These examples of settling status disputes carry over into our own peculiar human world. The chief of a boy's gang is often the one who can beat up all the rest, or who is better than the others in certain physical feats.

The first thing an Eskimo must do when he moves to a settlement which he has never visited before is to engage in a series of wrestling matches so that he may be placed in his proper place in the hierarchy of strength.

Even among infants, there is a hierarch of status established by conflict. In a study of 18 infants, 21 to 33 months old, it was observed that during the pre-play period the greatest number of conflicts were won by the less intelligent, taller, older, heavier children. An advantage in weight was found to be the most important settling factor.

Fortunately, mature humans in our society have substituted social, scientific, economic, scholastic, and political competition as the bases for settling disputes as to correct status. But even here we have "irregularities." Obviously, street fighting, wars, crime and other situations where physical combat decides status are expressions of less mature organization. After all, we hope to stay superior to the thirteen brown leghorn pullets of the "pecking order" experiment!

* * *

TO COMBAT INCENDIARY BOMBS

"RUN for your lives, they're dropping incendiary bombs" or "Steady men and we'll soon have these fires under control." Which of these statements will we hear if and when our American cities are ever bombed? The Office of Civilian Defense is making every effort to insure a systematic handling of fires started by incendiary bombs and is training thousands of civilians to know their jobs so well that panic will never get a chance to start. But willingness to fight these fire bombs is not enough. Tools and materials must be provided and here is where science and research lends its helping hand.

One of the latest discoveries is that feldspar when ground fine enough to pass through a 10-mesh screen but not through a 200-mesh screen is very effective in putting out incendiary bombs of the magnesium type. It has been tested very thoroughly at the Geological Survey Laboratories and

at the Chemical Warfare Service Arsenal located at Edgewood, Maryland.

Feldspar which is a potassium-aluminum silicate is very abundant. Its melting point is 2100° F. which is less than that of sand and both substances put out bombs on the same principle. The melted feldspar covers the burning magnesium in the bomb and smothers it. In tests it acted so quickly that only one-half of the magnesium was burned before the fire was put out.

Since it does not burn, smoke, or scatter very much, feldspar is far superior to sand or the many other mixtures used at present. It is a little more expensive than sand costing about \$1.00 per 150 pounds which is approximately the amount needed by the average household. The increased cost is offset by the fact that feldspar does away with all other expensive equipment and requires little instruction in its use. All one needs to do is sprinkle a little feldspar on the bomb and then watch to see that flying sparks don't get a chance to start another fire nearby.

Uncle Sam, in the person of the Department of the Interior, has arranged with the inventors of the process to obtain government controlled patent protection. Then reliable companies will be permitted to use the process to produce feldspar. This product will soon be available to householders.

* * *

A REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE IN U-BOATS

WAR becomes a very potent "necessity" that becomes "the mother of invention." Belligerent powers work constantly to improve their equipment. One of the most recent developments is in the field of naval construction—a new, improved submarine.

The capture of a German submarine has revealed one of the secrets of their improved maneuverability—a hydrogen-oxygen engine that operates when the vessel is submerged. This eliminates the heavy electric motors and batteries that account for about one-sixth of a U-boat's weight.

The single, modified Diesel engine burns oil on the surface and a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen for underwater maneuver. (Ordinarily, submarines use oil-burning Diesels on the surface and electric motors under water.)

The resulting reduction of tonnage allows greater speed for crash diving, affords an increase in torpedo load, and extends cruising range. Because of its sturdy construction, the sub can submerge to nearly 600 feet—about 300 feet beyond the reach of depth charges!

The new U-boat has smaller tubes than former undersea craft, allowing the use of a standardized torpedo also made for motor torpedo boats and planes. Another feature in its design is retractable deck guns; these enable the sub to open fire a few moments after surfacing.

It looks as if the Nazis wanted to keep their reputation of the last war: "the terror of ocean shipping"—with terror-hungry U-boats.

PAINLESS CHILDBIRTH

PAINLESS childbirth through injection of an anesthetic in the lower tip of the spine has now been made relatively safe through elimination of a former hazard, the possibility of a fatal spinal injection, the Journal of the American Medical Assn. has announced.

The improvement was devised by Dr. Nathan Block, and Dr. Morris Rotstein of Sinai Hospital, Baltimore, upon the original technique developed by Drs. Robert A. Hingson and Waldo B. Edwards of Stater Island, N. Y., announced last winter. It is known as caudal anesthesia.

Danger factor in the original method was that an injection of metycaine, a cocaine substitute, might accidentally enter the spinal canal instead of the caudal space at the tip of the spine, where nerves transmitting pain to the brain are located.

The Baltimore Physicians found that by using a saline solution at first, the number of drops per minute which enter the spinal canal is greater than the rate of flow into the caudal space. The saline solution is harmless, so that an accidental entry into the spinal canal would be discovered without harmful result. After the injection has been checked, the cocaine anesthetic is then administered by a continuous drip method.

The Baltimore Physicians believe the technique may be modified for surgery.

"Continuous caudal anesthesia has been very satisfactory in our hands," they reported, but added a warning that "certain highly dangerous complications are possible, and therefore it would be given only in well-equipped hospitals by persons experienced in the technique."

* * *

YELLOW SKINNED WAR WORKERS

A FEW months ago, the British Ministry of Labor and the managements of many of the Royal Ordnance factories were faced with a serious problem. It seems that the skin on the faces of the girls working near high explosives was turning yellow and though the girls didn't mind long hours or hard work they were not going to risk losing their beauty.

British chemists were immediately set to work to prepare cosmetics that would give the girls adequate protection.

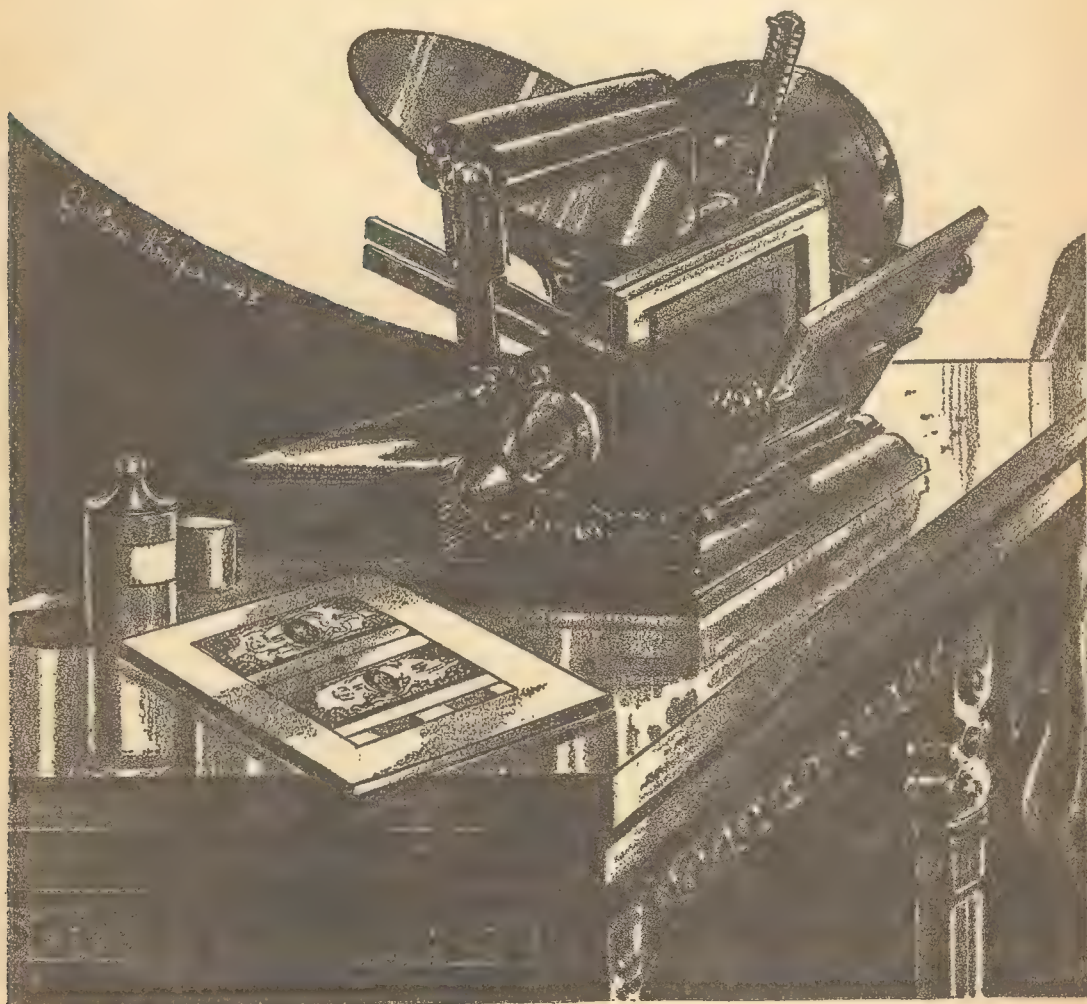
These cosmetics are furnished free of charge in the ladies' rooms located throughout the factories and every girl must use them. Women inspectors have been hired to tour the factories to enforce the rules that a girl must either use a calomine lotion and a fine face powder or else a non-greasy face cream covered with powder.

When the girls report for work, they apply the cosmetics under the supervision of the plant inspectors and cover their hair with white dust sheets. By this simple precaution, the girls can provide their faces with the necessary protection to keep it smooth and lovely and just as attractive as ever to the boys on leave.

A THOUGHT

BY LEROY YERXA

Percy was seven feet tall, so people
were careful what they said to him. Then
they learned it wasn't safe even to think!



IN TIME

A SHADOW passed between Inez Mathew and the window, blotting light from the office. Miss Mathew looked up, her attractive brown eyes widening.

"Goodness," she exclaimed. "Who let *you* in?"

Percy Dimwiddy, removed his cap, scraped his number thirteen shoes against the floor a little nervously and stared down at the pretty girl behind the desk.

"My name is Percy Dimwiddy," he announced in a meek voice. "I'd like to see Mr. Roberts."

Inez allowed her eyes to travel up and down the huge youth before her. There was a lot of Mr. Dimwiddy. About

The bound and gagged girl was lovely, redheaded Inez Mathew!



seven feet, including bulging shoulders and a clean-cut face that she liked almost at once.

"Cowboy," she said wonderingly. "I didn't know they made anything so big. What do you do about replacements, with a war on?"

Percy Dimwiddy considered the question. Twirling his cap on one finger, he leaned over and whispered in Miss Mathew's ear.

"You better be careful what you think about me. I pick thoughts from the air."

Miss Mathew rose quickly, a blush coloring her cheeks. She was not quite tall enough to reach Percy's shoulders.

"Are you getting fresh?"

Mr. Dimwiddy was very concerned.

"Oh dear, no!" he assured her. "I just want to play fair. Sometimes people think nice things about me, and I'm really not the fine specimen you just thought."

Miss Mathew turned a deeper shade of pink. She sat down abruptly, motioning him toward the door of Mike Roberts' office.

"Mr. Roberts will see you at once," she said in a low voice. "Fresh!"

Percy crossed the room and hesitated before the glass panel lettered *Michael Roberts—Theatrical Agent*. He had said the wrong thing again. Just when he started to like the girl behind the desk, he had to open his big mouth and spoil everything.

HE KNOCKED gently. "Come in," said a gruff voice beyond the panel.

Dimwiddy pushed the door open, bent his head for clearance and managed to scrape through. He stood before a desk littered with phones, girl-pictures and whiskey bottles. The man who sat behind it didn't look very brilliant. He wore a battered derby,

chewed on a wet cigar stub, and the fingers that fumbled with the pictures were fat and dirty. After a short time, he glanced up. His eye-lids popped skyward. He snatched a bottle and gulped at its contents hurriedly.

"I don't believe it," he said after he put the bottle down. "They don't make 'em this big without priorities."

"I'm Percy Dimwiddy. I heard you hired people for show acts."

Roberts stood up, thrusting his fingers to Dimwiddy's big paw. To his surprise, although Dimwiddy's grasp was firm, he broke none of Roberts' fingers.

"Sit down, Dimwiddy," he urged.

"What's your racket?"

"Racket?" Percy remained on his feet. He had a long-founded distrust for chairs.

Roberts was impatient.

"Act. You know. What do you do on the stage?"

"Oh!" Percy said. "I pick thoughts out of the air."

Mike grinned.

"Sorry, mind readers ain't what they use to be."

"But I'm not a mind reader, exactly," Dimwiddy protested. "That is, I'm no fake. You see, once we were having a history test in school. I found I could pick up everything the girl next to me was thinking. I finished the test on her thoughts."

Mike Roberts smiled sourly.

"A perfect mark, no doubt?"

Dimwiddy colored slightly.

"The girl had all the wrong answers," he confessed. "We both flunked."

Roberts leaned forward in his chair.

"Show me," he invited. "It don't sound so bad."

Dimwiddy concentrated.

"You were looking at a lot of pictures when I came in," he said. "Right now you're thinking about a girl called San-

dra Williams. You like her best because the costume she wears in the picture leaves little to the imagination. You've decided to hire her."

Roberts' face turned a mottled red. "You're pretty smart, ain't you?"

Dimwiddy didn't answer. He was staring at Roberts, and his face turned pink. Roberts tried desperately to cover up his thoughts. It proved impossible. Dimwiddy clenched his fists.

"I came up here to get a job," he said. "I guess you and I can't do business, Mr. Roberts."

He turned and started toward the door.

Roberts thought: *Who the hell does the big stiff think he is?*

Too late, he realized Mr. Dimwiddy's queer gift was still working. Percy wheeled, his hand on the door knob.

"I may be a big stiff," he blazed. "But right now your secretary is comparing you and me. You aren't coming out so good. She thinks you're a dried-up little rat."

Roberts was on his feet, arms waving wildly.

"You—you oversized man mountain!" he bellowed. "Get the hell out of here before . . ."

His voice died to a whisper.

"Where you gonna get an army in a hurry?" Dimwiddy asked calmly. He went out, slamming the door behind him. The glass shattered violently and settled back into the putty, still intact.

Mr. Dimwiddy crossed the outer office, stopped at the door and turned to Inez Mathew. Her typewriter clicked steadily. She did not look up.

"Thanks, Miss," he said. "I think you're pretty sweet."

He was half way to the elevator before Inez dared to think of *anything*.

home, thoughts hadn't disturbed him very much. Small towns produced people who didn't have many worries to pass along. Chicago was different. Everyone sent thoughts at him along the street about unpaid taxes and unhappy wives. Draft dodgers also made Dimwiddy miserable.

He found a lunch car, went inside and, standing behind one of the small stools, ordered a hamburger and a cup of coffee. The waiter, a kid of sixteen, stared at Percy Dimwiddy with great respect.

"Drag in the cow," he shouted to the cook. "Gulliver's here for a hamboig."

He turned to Percy.

"You working for a circus?"

Dimwiddy shook his head sadly.

"Nope! Just looking for a job. Only got here last night."

The kid whistled.

"Washing elephants would be easy for you," he said. "Oughta be a job like that around somewhere."

Dimwiddy smiled. There was nothing but honest admiration in the waiter's thoughts. He finished his first hamburger, decided he was still hungry and ordered six more.

"I tried to get on the stage," he admitted. "Went to see Mr. Roberts, the show man, but he didn't like me very well."

"Mike Roberts wouldn't give you the fuzz off his blankets," the boy said. "Don't bother with him. Go see Jerry Kern at the Vaudeville Club. Roberts works for him. Kern's got plenty of dough. Maybe he'll give you a break."

"Thanks," Percy said. "Will you tell me how to find him?"

The waiter scribbled an address on a paper napkin and passed it across the counter.

"The Vaudeville Club is down the street a ways," he said. "It's a big joint. You can't miss it."

FOR the first time in Percy Dimwiddy's life, he was unhappy. Back

Percy finished his meal in silence. He paid the check, thanked the waiter and started to leave.

"Drop in again," the kid invited. "You make up for six ordinary customers."

AT TEN o'clock the Vaudeville Club was doing a fair business. Cabs discharged their fares from the Loop under the awning of the club. The club had glitter and music that attracted a big following.

Jerry Kern entered his office just after ten, tossed his hat in the general direction of the rack and peeled cellophane from a slim cigar. He neglected to remove the expensive, tight-fitting gloves that covered slim fingers. Mike Roberts had been waiting for Kern to come in. Roberts removed his feet from Kern's desk hurriedly and stood up. Ignoring Roberts, Kern sat down and started to scan through a stack of letters. His fingers darted about in quick, decisive movements. The thin, curled lips and narrow eyes reminded Mike Roberts of something closely akin to the rat family. He didn't like Kern, but the boss had money and Mike could overlook a lot for that reason.

He waited until Kern checked the last letter, removed a large silk handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead.

"Did you get those girls for next week's chorus?" Kern asked sharply.

Roberts nodded.

"Sure did," he said. "They're pips."

Kern left the desk, went to the wall and took down a large painting. There was a small wall safe hidden behind it. Kern twisted the dial expertly and opened the safe.

"Is Inez outside?" he asked.

Mike nodded.

"We're all set," he said.

Kern took out two small parcels.

They were wrapped in brown paper and taped securely.

"Let Inez take the first one to the currency exchange on Walnut Street." Kern passed the packages to Mike Roberts. "You can deliver the other to Casey's Exchange on Twelfth and Pine."

"Right."

Roberts pushed the packages into his coat pockets. "You're pretty smart, Jerry."

"I get by," Kern answered. He closed the safe, replaced the painting and returned to his desk.

A KNOCK sounded on the door.

"Come in," Kern said.

One of the bartenders entered, wiping his hands on his apron.

"Sorry to bother you, Boss," he said. "But there's a big bruiser outside what wants to see you."

Kern was once more busy at the desk. He looked up impatiently.

"Get rid of him."

The bartender's face colored slightly.

"I don't think we oughta do that," he protested. "He's pretty big. Maybe you better handle him."

Kern started to speak, then hesitated. A smile twitched his lips.

"Who is this guy?"

"Says his name is Dimwiddy," the bartender mumbled. "Percy Dimwiddy."

"Oh-oh!" Mike Roberts slid forward in his chair. "Maybe you oughta talk with this guy, Mr. Kern. He was at the office today. Stands seven feet tall in his stocking feet."

Kern smiled unpleasantly.

"Send Dimwiddy in," he said. "Perhaps I can use him."

"Keep him outside for a minute," Roberts said. "There's something about Dimwiddy I think the boss oughta know."

The bartender looked at Kern, caught his signal and went out. Roberts leaned over Kern's desk.

"Look out for this Dimwiddy," he cautioned. "He can read minds. Anyhow, when you think something, he can tell what you're thinking."

For an instant Kern looked startled. Then he grinned unpleasantly.

"Anyone can read minds," he said. "The way to prevent it, though, is just think of a lot of things that aren't important. I'll have your mind reader so confused he'll go batty."

Roberts started to bluster.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

Kern's hand shot out and closed around Roberts' wrist like a steel band.

"Warn me about what?" His eyes narrowed.

Roberts' face turned white.

"I didn't mean nothin' special," he said. "Just—well, it ain't no fun having a guy telling you what you're thinking before you can get it out."

The fingers relaxed.

"No one gets information out of me until I'm ready to talk," Kern said coolly.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Come in, Mr. Dimwiddy," Kern said in a pleasant voice.

Percy Dimwiddy hesitated just inside the door. He twirled his cap on one finger and stared at Kern.

Mr. Kern had Percy Dimwiddy puzzled. There were an awful lot of disconnected thoughts floating around the room, and Dimwiddy couldn't make sense out of them. He had a feeling that Mike Roberts had warned Kern, although he couldn't be sure. Jerry Kern was thinking about a cottage at Mountain View—about making love to Inez Mathew and—yes, odd as it seemed, Kern was thinking how he'd have to hide paper plates from Inez when they went to Mountain View.

That last part had Percy stumped. He was suddenly angry to find that Kern and Miss Mathew were so friendly, and he wondered what in heck Kern meant by hiding paper plates.

HE DIDN'T have time to sort out any more of the thoughts that were floating about the room.

Mr. Kern stood up and walked over to Dimwiddy.

"I understand you want a job," he said.

"Yes, sir," Percy answered eagerly. "I thought perhaps if I came and saw you . . ."

Kern smiled approvingly.

"I guess you'll be okay," he said. "Ever work as a body-guard?"

Percy wasn't sure, but somehow he felt Kern wasn't telling or thinking what was really most important in his mind. The thoughts in the room were all blurred and mixed up. They didn't make sense.

"No, sir," he said. "But I could try. I guess I'm pretty strong. I might scare people all right."

"Good," Kern said. "Go out and have a few drinks on the house. You'll start work at once. I'll be out in half an hour and you can see that I get home safely."

He took a small automatic pistol from his pocket and passed it to Dimwiddy.

"Better carry this from now on," he said. "You probably won't have to use it, but better be on the safe side."

Dimwiddy drew away.

"I'd—I'd rather not carry a gun," he said weakly. "I guess I won't need it."

Kern's lips tightened.

"You want the job, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. I need it."

"Then let me be the judge," Kern said. "A body-guard needs a rod."

Dimwiddy took the weapon and put

it carefully into his pocket.

"Thanks," he said. "They gave me some milk at the bar. I'll wait there until you want me."

Mike Roberts chuckled and Dimwiddy whirled toward him.

"Milk never did me any harm," he said. "I've got an idea I could knock the stuffing out of you if Mr. Kern told me to."

Kern smiled.

"You two better be friendly," he said. "From now on, you're working for the same man."

Dimwiddy looked doubtful.

"And when you go out, tell the barkeep to send Miss Mathew in here."

"Yes, sir." Percy felt better. Maybe he'd at least have a chance to see Miss Mathew if they both worked for the same boss.

Outside, he found the barkeep, delivered his message and sat down before a tall glass of milk. In a few minutes he saw the trim figure of Inez Mathew as she went toward Jerry Kern's office. Later, she and Mike Roberts came out and left the club hurriedly.

HALF an hour passed. Percy amused himself by picking up odd thoughts that drifted around the Vaudeville Club. Jerry Kern came from his office and motioned Percy after him. They picked up their coats at the check room.

"Okay, Gulliver," Kern said. "We're going home now."

He led the way toward the entrance. As they crossed the sidewalk toward Kern's car, three uniformed men came from the shadows, guns in hand.

"Okay, Jerry, up with your mitts."

Kern raised his hands slowly.

A short, red-faced policeman poked a gun into Dimwiddy's ribs.

"You too, big boy," the cop said.

"Jerry's friends are my friends at a time like this."

Percy Dimwiddy, completely bewildered, followed Kern's example. He felt the cop's hands as they went swiftly over his clothing and stopped on the hard bulge of the automatic. The cop whistled.

"Well, well," he said, pulling the gun out. "Looks like we got the right party."

"What the hell's the idea?" Kern asked angrily. "He wouldn't hurt anyone."

The cop chuckled.

"One of you knows Randy Edwards," he said. "If I'm not way off the track, this will be the gun that killed him. Let's all take a ride down to the station and make sure."

BUT I *am* telling the truth," Percy Dimwiddy protested. "I just went to work for Mr. Kern tonight. He gave me the gun at the club and I was going to see that he got home safe. I didn't know it was against the law to carry it. I thought he knew best."

Sergeant Jim Waddle was both angry and exhausted. His throat was parched from asking many questions.

"We know, we know," he said with mock sweetness. "So you took the gun because he asked you to. Listen, kid, you may be big but you ain't smart. There's no prints on that gun but yours. Randy Edwards was found dead in his currency exchange over on Wallace Street. We know Randy had something on Kern. He was about ready to tell us what it was. That's why we picked up Kern. I don't know if he's mixed up in it or not, but you need money and you got the gun. Kern's got the alibi. Now, are you gonna talk?"

Dimwiddy was bewildered. They had kept him under a bright light for

three hours. He had picked up Jim Waddle's thought, and he knew the policeman wasn't sure of himself. Percy knew that Kern had framed him somehow, but he didn't know how he was going to prove it.

Mike Roberts and Inez Mathew were mixed up with Kern. He hated to believe that the girl was a crook.

"I tell you I just got the gun tonight," he said again. "I never even heard of . . ."

Waddle groaned.

"Okay," he said. "Let's sleep on that. Maybe in the morning you'll see that it ain't any use to lie. Take him out, boys."

Two husky policemen sidled toward Percy.

"I'm not going to fight," Percy said. "You won't have to be afraid."

The cops looked at each other in dismay. How in hell did he know they were afraid of him?

THE policeman led Dimwiddy along the row of cells, through two doors that he locked carefully behind him and into the visitor's room.

"You got ten minutes," the cop said. "There's a girl here who wants to see you."

Dimwiddy's heart jumped. Before he was half-way to the table where Inez Mathew sat, he picked up lovely, warm-hearted thoughts from her. Inez looked very tired.

"Hello," Percy said hesitantly. "I'm glad you came."

She stared at him, slightly bewildered by what had happened.

"How did you get into this terrible mess?"

Dimwiddy was trying hard to pick up coherent thoughts from her mind. She seemed on guard. The vagrant thoughts that he managed to catch were mostly about herself. She seemed wor-

ried about trips she had taken to Randy Edwards' exchange. Once, he was sure she thought for a minute about Jerry Kern, and the thought expressed worry for Kern's safety.

"They think I killed a man named Randy Edwards," he said a little stiffly. "I had a gun that Kern gave me. I never heard of Edwards."

Inez leaned forward eagerly.

"You think Jerry Kern might have something to do with it?"

I hope not! Oh, I hope not! she was thinking.

Dimwiddy was on guard at once.

"I don't know anything about Kern," he said. "I only met him last night. Do you know anything that might help me get out of here?"

A number of things, she was thinking. But they can't be true. Kern would involve me in this thing. I'd maybe go to jail with him. No! Jerry knows nothing about the murder.

Dimwiddy picked up each thought carefully, and found himself suddenly hating Inez and Jerry Kern.

"I can't understand how Mr. Kern could kill anyone," she said aloud. "He used to send the money he made at the club to the bank. One night the armored car was held up and his money was stolen. Of course he was insured and didn't lose a cent. Still, after that, he always sent Mike Roberts and me to various cash exchanges with the day's proceeds. It's an odd way to handle money, but I see nothing in it that would point to murder."

"Then you knew Edwards?" Percy asked.

"I've taken money to him several times," Inez admitted. "He was a nice fellow. I can't believe . . ."

Percy Dimwiddy shook his head.

"I didn't kill him," he said. "But I can't make sense out of it. Kern must know something that we don't."

"Ten minutes are up." The cop came up behind Dimwiddy. "The lady will have to go."

"Mr. Kern is putting up bail for you." Inez rose hastily. "He sent cash to his lawyer this morning. If everything goes well at the preliminary hearing, we'll have you out of jail tomorrow night."

"Thanks," Percy answered. "I appreciate everything . . ."

"Sorry," the cop behind Percy said in a loud voice. "Time's up."

Percy turned once more as he reached the door. Inez was watching him. She looked very sad.

JIM WADDLE was waiting in the front office. He tossed Dimwiddy's pocketbook and comb to him and grinned.

"Okay," he said. "For the time being, you're free to go. Guess we got a fight on our hands. Kern's hired a good criminal lawyer."

Percy knew what Waddle was up to. He could read Waddle's thoughts like a book. The fat policeman hadn't been able to get a confession. He was going to play the part of a buddy and secure what information he could.

"Did Mr. Kern put up the bail money?" Percy asked.

Waddle nodded.

"A big wad of it," he admitted.

Percy Dimwiddy had been thinking things out pretty carefully since Inez Mathew's visit. A lot of points refused to tie up. If Jerry Kern meant to frame him, why did he put up that bail money?

"Mr. Waddle," Dimwiddy asked suddenly. "I wonder if you'd let me help you solve this case. I got a lot of ideas that I wish you'd help me figure out. Maybe you haven't much to do this morning?"

To say that Waddle was surprised

would be an understatement. His eyes narrowed.

"You trying to put over a fast one?"

Dimwiddy expressed utter astonishment.

"No—honest," he said. "I didn't kill Randy Edwards. I've never seen him. I sort of wanted to go over to the currency exchange where he was murdered. Could you go along?"

Waddle thought the thing out slowly, and Dimwiddy knew Waddle's answer before it came.

Waddle wasn't a fool. He figured that Dimwiddy might do something that would trip him up, if he revisited the scene of the crime.

"Okay," he said finally. "We'll have to be back before noon. I still can't figure . . ."

"Don't try," Percy Dimwiddy begged. "I think I got some ideas, that's all."

THE currency exchange in which Randy Edwards had been murdered was a small, box-like affair wedged between a couple of office buildings. The place was locked. Waddle produced a key and opened the door. They went inside.

"Damndest thing I ever heard of," Waddle mumbled. "Revisiting the scene of a killing with the murderer at his suggestion. I still can't figure how they let Kern bail you out."

Percy Dimwiddy was wandering about slowly. Instead of looking for clues, he closed his eyes tightly and walked from one side of the room to the other.

"Randy Edwards was killed while he was sitting back of the cage?" he asked.

Waddle nodded.

"You ought to know," he grumbled.

Dimwiddy opened the small door that led to the cashier's cage and went in-

side. He sat down in the chair where Edwards had evidently been sitting when he was shot. Closing his eyes again for a long time, he sat motionless, as though half asleep.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"Do you know where Mountain View is?" he asked Waddle eagerly.

Waddle thought for a moment.

"Taking a summer vacation?" he asked sarcastically.

"We got to get to Mountain View right away," Dimwiddy insisted. He left the booth, and came out to the front of the exchange. "I think I can find your murderer for you, and prove that he killed Edwards."

"That's what we need — proof," Waddle agreed. "I can touch the murderer from where I stand. Now tell me how you did it?"

It was Dimwiddy's turn to become sarcastic.

"I wanted to help you, Mr. Waddle," he said. "You can't prove I did something that I didn't know anything about. We've got to get to Mountain View right away. It may be too late if you keep on stalling."

Waddle thought the whole thing over carefully. What could he lose? At least he was keeping track of Dimwiddy.

"Okay," he agreed. "It's the screwiest murder setup I've ever had, me solving the murder with the help of the killer himself. I got gas enough for fifty miles. Come on."

The ride to Mountain View was a swift one. Percy Dimwiddy had everything figured out nicely now. So smoothly that he was heart-broken about the whole thing. It all straightened out with the two old thoughts he had managed to pick up while he and Waddle were at the exchange. First, he found one of Inez Mathew's thoughts which had evidently stayed locked into

the small room after the police left.

Inez had been there sometime, probably about the time Edwards was shot.

I can't see any harm in the trip to Mountain View, Inez's thought told Dimwiddy. *As long as Mr. Roberts and the other girl are along.*

The other thought must have been Randy Edwards'.

The money's counterfeit, all right, Randy Edwards had thought as he sat in the chair behind the cage. *Kern's number is up, as soon as I tell the cops.*

"IT'S all quite simple," Dimwiddy thought as Waddle's car sped into the deep, pine-clad valley of Mountain View. "Kern makes counterfeit dough and uses Mike Roberts and Inez to distribute it for him. Edwards found out, and was ready to squeal. Kern shot him, planted the gun on me, then to clear himself once and for all, he put up bail money to get me out. He knew Waddle would pin enough on me sooner or later to put me back in jail."

He was conscious suddenly that the car had stopped at a gas station near the edge of a mountain lake, and that Waddle had spoken to him.

"Huh?" Percy asked.

"I said, here we are. Where next?"

"Oh," Percy said. "Could we ask someone where Jerry Kern's cabin is?"

"Kern?" Waddle's fingers clutched the wheel a little more tightly. "Sure, wait a minute."

Percy was sure Inez didn't know Kern was making counterfeit money. He remembered that meaningless thought he had picked up in Kern's office to the effect that Kern would have to hide the paper plates from the girl. Kern's thoughts must have been a little garbled. To make counterfeit money, it took paper—a special kind—and plates for the printing. Why hadn't he thought of that?

An attendant was busy filling the gasoline tank of Waddle's car.

"You know a guy named Kern?" Waddle asked him. "Supposed to have a cottage up here somewhere?"

The attendant, a gangly, sleepy individual, scratched his chin and leaned on the side of the car.

"Kern?" His eyes brightened. "Oh, sure—Jerry Kern. He came through here just this morning. Had a fella and a girl in the back seat of his car. Drive up this road about half a mile and turn off toward the lake. It's the only cottage off the road. Can't miss it."

"Thanks," Waddle said, and waited for change.

"You got a gun with you?" Dimwiddy asked.

Waddle grinned.

"You're fixing to have some fun, ain't you? Yeah, I got a cannon."

THEY drove for a while, found the small, rutted road and turned down across sandy fields toward a grove of trees by the lake.

"You better stop before we get too close," Dimwiddy said. "We don't want them to know we're coming."

He was worried about Inez. If Kern had brought a couple in the rear seat, they would be Mike and his girl friend. What about Inez? Percy hoped she hadn't come. Perhaps she was innocent after all.

Waddle, so bewildered that he was ready for anything, stopped just at the entrance of the grove and turned off the motor. They climbed out and moved forward cautiously.

The cottage, a rambling, one-story affair, was close to the water. Brown shingles glistened in the sun on the far side of the grove. Dimwiddy led the way. The back of the cottage had two small windows. Percy Dimwiddy went

swiftly to one of them, and stood close to the rear wall. Waddle, puffing a bit, reached his side.

Dimwiddy pushed up one of the windows gently and they climbed in. Voices, subdued and mysterious, were coming from another part of the cottage. Dimwiddy went to the far side of the bedroom and stood by the closed door, listening.

Kern was beyond the door. Dimwiddy heard him, his voice angry and threatening.

"You two got your cut. We'll have to quit and lay low for a while."

Knowing that he was probably putting Inez Mathew behind bars, Dimwiddy motioned Waddle across the room. Waddle, his ear close to the panel, listened as Mike Roberts raised his voice in protest.

"But the cops don't know nothing about the counterfeit racket. Edwards died before he could squeal."

Dimwiddy, triumphant and sad at the same time, watched Waddle's eyelids raise.

"You keep your mouth shut about Edwards," Kern said. "That goof Dimwiddy will take the rap. After this, we don't even know there was a Randy Edwards."

"But, Boss, they can't get nothing on you. You were wearing gloves——"

Crack!

"Ouch!" Roberts yelled. "You didn't have to . . ."

"Shut up," Kerns shouted. "I told you not to talk about Edwards."

Silence for a minute, then:

"What about the girl?"

Kern chuckled.

"What do you think I drove up to the lake for?"

There was a sudden feminine cry of protest.

"My God, you wouldn't . . ."

Dimwiddy did not recognize the

voice. It wasn't Inez, he was sure.

"The bottom of the lake is a good place for the girl and the printing press," Kern was saying. "The girl knows too much. I'll put enough grease on the press so we can pull it out and go to work again when things clear up."

Waddle nodded suddenly and Percy Dimwiddy knew the cop had heard enough. Waddle stood well away from the door, and drew his pistol. He kicked the door open and yelled:

"Put 'em up, before I start spraying lead!"

MIKE ROBERTS jerked around quickly. At sight of Waddle his eyes widened and his hands shot toward the ceiling. There was a tall, red-haired girl at his side. She looked out of place in a low-cut dancing-frock and mascara that had run down her cheeks. She screamed and her arms jerked over her head. Kern had been sitting on the edge of a desk. Beside him were a small printing press, a couple of ink cans and some zinc plates. His fingers, slim and glove-covered, went up slowly, reluctantly. His smile was humorless.

"That's what I call gratitude," he said smoothly. "I spend good dough to bail out a cheap crook and he turns around and bites me."

Percy Dimwiddy didn't hear him. He was across the room and beside the girl lying on the davenport. It was Inez Mathew. Her arms and legs were tied firmly with heavy rope. She had a thick gag in her mouth.

"Good dough, is it?" Waddle moved toward Kern slowly, a tight grin on his face. "We can find that bail money in a hurry, Kern. I'll bet it's counterfeit like everything else about you."

DURING the trip home in Waddle's car, Percy Dimwiddy was very

happy. Kern, Roberts and Mike's girl friend were locked safely in the county jail at Mountain View. Inez, a little frightened, was sitting between Waddle and Percy Dimwiddy.

"But how in hell did you figure it out?" Waddle asked at last. "All you did was sit around with your eyes closed, like you was sleeping. Then bingo—we hit the jack-pot."

Inez looked up at Percy with dreamy, worshipping eyes.

"He has a gift," she said. "He *does* read minds, and he even picks up thoughts after people think them."

Waddle chuckled.

"That's good!" He started to laugh and his cheeks got very red. "That's rich! I'll sound convincing if I try to tell the Chief *that* story."

"I can't understand why Kern was going to kill you!" Percy drew her close to him with a big arm.

"I was trying to help you," Inez confessed. A shudder passed through her. "I asked a lot of questions and finally he made me admit I thought he was the murderer. They were going to throw me in the lake."

"If it hadn't been for our thought detective," Waddle admitted, "they might have succeeded."

MIKE ROBERTS had no further use for his office. Kern didn't need an agent any longer. At eleven-fifteen Monday morning, the inter-office set on Inez Mathew's desk buzzed. She snapped the button down.

"Yes, Mr. Dimwiddy?"

"Miss Mathew, will you take a letter?"

Inez, armed with pencil and notebook, entered Roberts' former office. A new sign, *Percy Dimwiddy — Private Detective*, was painted on the door.

"Yes, Mr. Dimwiddy?"

He smiled at her.

"I'm glad you weren't mixed up in that counterfeit money business," he said. "I figured, after you talked to me, that Kern must have a good reason for peddling his money around that way. Randy Edwards got wise and was ready to tell the police. Edwards was thinking about it just before he died and I picked up his thoughts. The word counterfeit fitted in with Kern's thoughts about paper and plates. I figured he was trying to get you to Mountain View and his printing plant must be up there. You thought quite a lot of Kern, didn't you?"

Inez shook her head.

"It was you, silly!" she admitted. "After I talked with you, I decided to go to Mountain View with him. I tried to help you, but he was too clever. He found out why I went and was going to kill me before I could tell on him."

Percy Dimwiddy sighed.

"It's all over now, I guess."

"I—I think I'm going to like my new job," Inez confessed. "I'm sure we'll—that is—you will make a fine pair—er—that is, a fine detective."

Percy blushed.

"What you're really thinking is, we'd make a nice man and wife," he reminded her. "Please sit down, Miss Mathew."

Inez looked around for a chair, found none, and was pulled down onto Percy's knee. For the next two minutes she struggled half-heartedly to release herself.

"You big goof," she managed between kisses. "How could a wife keep secrets from you?"

Percy scowled. "You'd better not try," he warned.

THE END

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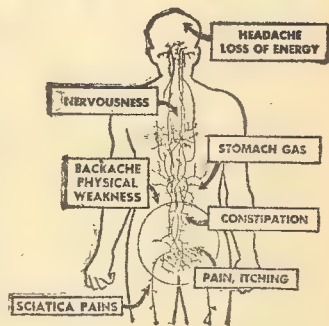
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VIGNETTES OF FAMOUS SCIENTISTS

By ALEXANDER BLADE

Karl Wilhelm Scheele

Of all scientists, perhaps he was the one who discovered the greatest number of new substances and elements

THE Swedish chemist, Karl Wilhelm Scheele, was born at Stralsund, the capital of Pomerania, which then belonged to Sweden, on December 19, 1742. Of his early life almost nothing is known. But at the age of twenty-five he opened an apothecary shop at Stockholm, and three years later moved to Uppsala, presumably on account of the advantages to be gained at the university there, in prosecuting his studies in chemistry, which had begun some years previously, and for which he must have had some preliminary training. Whether this was the case or not, he quickly became known as the discoverer of a number of elements and compounds that proved to be of importance in the rapidly growing arts of his day.

In Uppsala he made the personal acquaintance of Bergman. A friendship soon sprang up between the two men, and it has been said that Scheele was Bergman's greatest discovery. In 1775, the year in which he was elected into the Stockholm Academy of Sciences, he left Stockholm for Köping, a small place on Lake Malar, where he became proprietor of a pharmacy. He found time for an extraordinary amount of original research, and every year he published two or three papers, most of which contained some discovery or observation of importance. His unremitting work, it is said, especially at night, induced a rheumatic attack which brought about his death on May 19, 1786.

Scheele's record as a discoverer of new substances is probably unequalled, in spite of his poverty and lack of ordinary laboratory conveniences.

The first of these was tartaric acid, a compound of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen which occurs abundantly in the vegetable world, and particularly in that product of the fermentation of grape juice which is known as argol. This substance had of course been known for centuries, and from it the commercial product called tartar and cream of tartar was prepared, consisting essentially of a combination of the tartrates of potash and lime. But the acid itself had never been isolated. That feat Scheele accomplished, recovering it in the form of colorless transparent crystals which, many years later, were found to possess the very curious property, when gently warmed, of becoming strongly electrified, the opposite sides of each

crystal exhibiting the opposite states of that form of energy. He made no attempt to resolve this new compound into its component elements and, in fact, none of the three were then even known, except hydrogen, which went under the name of phlogiston.

His next important discovery, in 1774, was the gas chlorine, which he called "dephlogisticated marine acid gas," as he recovered it from sea salt. He did not become aware of its elementary character, and it was not until Davy, thirty years later, isolated it, that it was given the name it now bears. In the same year Scheele produced baryta for the first time. He extracted it from the mineral witherite, but did not push his investigation any further. It was to him simply a new substance. But again Davy, in 1808, following his lead, and using a powerful voltaic battery, separated the metal barium from it, and proved its elementary nature.

In 1775 Scheele discovered the gas oxygen, without the knowledge that it had been discovered by Priestley in 1774. Scheele gave it the name of empyrial air. A little later the name of "vital air" was suggested for it, because not only could it be breathed to a limited extent with impunity, but when inhaled caused a wonderful sensation of exhilaration.

Finally, in 1770, Scheele produced accidentally in his laboratory, a syrupy liquid with a sweet taste, which he called glycerin; and shortly thereafter, in much the same way, the highly poisonous compound hydrocyanic acid, which was popularly known in his time as prussic acid. In neither case was he able to determine its ultimate composition. Both of these substances are of importance in the arts, especially glycerin, which was thoroughly investigated by Chevreul.

Scheele was in no sense a chemist. In fact, that science had hardly come into existence in his time. But he was an earnest and tireless investigator of the alchemistic order, and while practically all his discoveries were chance ones, he deserves the credit for them. It was just such a chance discovery that he happened to encounter that compound of arsenic and copper which is still known commercially as "Scheele's Green," and which is extensively used in the arts connected with the production of wall paper and printed calico.

APPOINTMENT

By LEE
FRANCIS



WITH THE PAST

Under their amazed eyes, boat and oarsman began slowly to fade into eerie nothingness



From the sixteenth century came a fantastic ghost galiot, seeking two men from today who could rectify an ancient wrong

CAPTAIN JOHN WEDGE of the *Red Widow* watched the Dutch galiot heave to. In spite of the badly tattered sails and the weathered condition of the vessel, Wedge recognized Captain Vanderdecken's ship at once.

Wedge swung down the ladder gracefully and dropped into the long-boat. Ruff Slants, the mate, leaned far over the rail.

"Put a shot into her mainmast if she tries to show her heels," Wedge shouted.

The mate grinned broadly. His small eyes were glistening.

"Aye, sir!" His voice rumbled like far-off thunder. "We'll teach them a thing or two. Don't you worry, Captain."

Wedge settled his splendidly attired figure in the prow of the long-boat and pulled the plumed hat down close to his eyes.

"Pull away," he ordered. "We've a score to even with Captain Hans Vanderdecken."

The long-boat swept away from the Free Rover's ship and sped swiftly across the green swells of the Atlantic. Captain Wedge was right enough about the weather-tossed ship that had come around and stood by off some five hundred yards. The *Oriental*, a three-masted Dutchman with tattered, dirty sails, had seen hard days since Wedge had watched her slip under the mighty guns of the Sovereign of the Seas and clear the English coast for Tunis.

Captain Hans Vanderdecken was a quiet, honorable man. As a Dutchman, he loved his country and went to many ends to preserve his own reputation. He stood now at the rail of the *Oriental* waiting for the slim, polished long-boat as it knifed the waves toward him. He knew that Captain Wedge and his splendid fighter, the *Red Widow*, were on an unpleasant mission.

Hans Vanderdecken was no fighter; yet he was not the one to run from a battle. The *Red Widow* carried thirty-two heavy cannon. His own craft had but sixteen on her gun deck and his men had little spirit left for fighting.

The Dutchman held his ground, his velvet clothing faded and spotted by sun and salt water. His face was unkempt and covered by a rough beard. Behind him, a sullen crew presented no better appearance. They had known what was coming and waited stolidly, unafraid of the death that they had faced so often.

The long-boat scraped the side of the ship. Captain Vanderdecken met John Wedge at the rail, offering his arm to assist the Free Rover aboard.

Wedge, his handsome face stormy with anger, vaulted over the rail alone, ignoring Vanderdecken's gesture of friendship.

"Captain Hans Vanderdecken." Wedge's voice was sharp. "It seems you couldn't escape us, for all your blundering about the sea."

Vanderdecken's face expressed sadness and bewilderment at once.

"But, Captain Wedge," he protested. "I've been searching for you these many weeks. I had no wish to escape the *Red Widow*."

Wedge's fists clenched tightly. He strode a few steps up the deck, turned and faced the Dutchman, trying to control his temper.

THREE of the seamen from the *Red Widow* had left the long-boat and were at the rail, waiting for their captain's orders. Wedge faced the captain of the *Oriental* with head thrown back, long black hair blowing in the wind. In silken cape, knee-breeches and square-toed, buckle-topped shoes, he was an arrogant, splendid figure of a man. In contrast with his finery, Vanderdecken seemed a member of his own crew. Wedge stared into the Dutchman's sunken blue eyes.

"Captain," he said calmly. "You were once an honest man. I trusted you on a mission that meant life to sixty of my closest friends. You carried so vast a fortune that it turned your head. You failed on that mission, and now I'm going to punish you as I would singe the mangy beard of a Spanish don."

"First, you will hear my story?" Vanderdecken's voice was low, harsh with emotion.

Wedge reached into the pocket of his breeches and drew out a small sheet of rolled parchment. He thrust it toward Vanderdecken.

"This message came overland by stage from Tunis," he said testily. "Johnathan Fisher's son escaped from the Dey. Read it and profit by the knowledge of what you have done."

The Dutchman took the scroll hesitantly. It was dated, Tunis, the thirtieth day of the third month, 1648.

*To My Dear Friend and Loyal Partner,
Captain John Wedge:*

"This message is sent at a poor time. The ship to which you entrusted the silver has not arrived. The Dey is deeply angered and will not wait longer. We shall, all sixty of us, including the women, die at the hands of the Dey before this reaches you.

I pray to God that my son will escape and reach you with this message. I know not who took to sea with the silver and failed to arrive in time to appease the Dey's wrath. I can only say that whoever he may be, may his ship sail the seven seas without peace for the remainder of time, and may he never rest so long as the trade winds blow."

*Your Ob't Servant,
Johnathan Fisher*

Vanderdecken's eyes swept up to catch the fanatical fury on Wedge's face.

"This is a great injustice," the Dutchman protested in a broken voice. "We arrived outside Tunis only a day late. There was no point in leaving the silver, with the terrible deed already done. I tried to return hastily and report my failure to you."

Wedge waved his arm angrily.

"No explanation is necessary, Captain," he snarled. "You were sent to save the lives of those unfortunate people. Nothing can justify your failure to do so."

Dutchman and Free Rover stared at each other. Vanderdecken's expression

was that of a man who faces an unjustified death. There was no pity in Wedge's eyes. His anger was a deep, tangible thing that could not be quenched by explanations.

"Believe me, sir," Vanderdecken said haltingly. "Above all, I am a man of honor. There was mutiny, and worse, aboard my ship. I was unable . . ."

"Enough," Wedge thundered. "You shall find no forgiveness in my heart. You say the silver is still in your hold?" Vanderdecken nodded hopelessly.

"Every bar," he said. "I planned to return it to you."

Wedge turned toward his own men.

"Lock this blubbering fool in his cabin," he shouted. "Signal the mate to pull alongside and set the grappling irons. Prepare to remove the cargo to the Red Widow."

DURING the half day it took to handle the silver, Vanderdecken remained locked in his cabin. Wedge, in turn, did not leave his spacious quarters below deck on his own ship. Slants brought him news that the silver was in the hold and the *Oriental* empty of wealth. Then Wedge went on deck.

In a manner, he pitied Vanderdecken. The *Oriental* had once been a fine ship. Now, her hull covered with barnacles from many months at sea, and scoured clean of paint by the storms she had faced, Vanderdecken's craft was a sorry object. Vanderdecken was released from his cabin at Wedge's orders. Wedge waited until the Dutchman came abreast of him on the other deck.

"Order your crew to cast off," Wedge shouted. "Put on a full head of canvas and stand away."

Vanderdecken could not answer. Five minutes later the ships had scraped slowly apart. Men went swiftly into the shrouds of the *Orien-*

tal. They moved mechanically, expecting death yet asking no quarter.

The wind stirred the square-rigged canvas of the main mast and the Dutch galliot moved away. She cut the water lazily, as though she no longer had a goal. The *Red Widow* remained motionless. Below, on the gun deck, the master gunner had ordered powder broken out and sixteen guns were primed, with fuses ready. The *Oriental* was under a full spread of canvas now and moving swiftly southward. Captain John Wedge watched her coolly, calculating a fair distance for the first shot. He turned to the waiting Master gunner.

"Give her a ball across the bow," he said sharply. "When she comes about, let her have a broadside that will send her to Davey Jones."

The first gun roared and smoke belched from its ugly barrel. The foremast of the *Oriental* took the blow squarely and crumpled into the sea. The Dutch ship swung around slowly, as though bewildered by the attack.

"Now!" Wedge shouted.

The *Red Widow* groaned in protest under the force of the sixteen-gun broadside. A cheer went up from the quarter deck and the *Oriental* bucked suddenly and leaned over like a wounded thing. Fire broke out below her decks and licked upward into the sails. Canvas billowed down like a dirty shroud over a casket. The *Oriental* was little more than that. Her nose dived down sharply. Long, hissing streamers of smoke floated into the sky as water came up eagerly and licked over the foundering ship.

Wedge watched the last bit of timber as it caught in the whirlpool and was sucked down behind the stricken vessel. Then he turned to the mate.

"So much for our fine Captain Vanderdecken," he said. "May his death

avenge the murder of my men."

Slants shook his head slowly.

There was a puzzled, frightened look on the mate's ugly face.

"I'm wondering about that curse, Cap'n Wedge," he said. "Curses ain't put down to be forgotten. They don't rest easy until they have been filled."

John Wedge chuckled.

"Hans Vanderdecken has filled his part of the bargain," he said. "I made sure the *Oriental* won't sail after this day. She's spiked down snugly in Davey Jones' locker."

CHAPTER II

Passenger to Where?

FOG settled over New York Harbor, blotting out the Statue of Liberty and Staten Island. A dense blanket of white hung close to the water. The Jersey Ferry plowed uncertainly ahead as though seeking her mooring through memory of many past trips. In the wheel house a portly, blue-uniformed captain kept his ears and eyes alert to the changing sounds near him.

Fog horns ripped the silence in every direction. A sullen-faced young man and a slicker-clad girl leaned over the lower rail, watching the barely visible water as it drifted below them. Robert Fisher, of medium height and handsome in a sullen, tired way, waited for the girl to make some explanation. At last she looked up, staring at him with brown, tear-filled eyes.

"Then it's to be that way?" she asked in a low voice.

Fisher turned suddenly, pushing her against the rail, his hands closing tightly over her wrists.

"You're damned right," he said harshly. "You've been running around with the heel and you don't deny it. The *News* job keeps me busy but I still

manage to get around a lot nights."

She struggled silently, trying to release his grip on her arms.

"Please, Bob, you're hurting me."

"And I'll hurt you worse," Bob Fisher said. "I'm not playing second fiddle to Adams. You're a two-timing . . ."

Arlene Williams managed to release one hand. She brought it across his cheek with all her strength.

"You're the most stubborn, unreasonable man I've ever seen. I've had dinner with Mr. Adams a few times. We work at the same office. I don't like being alone, and I can't see that any harm is done . . ."

She bit her lip and blood showed against the smooth whiteness of her teeth.

"I told you to stay away from him," Fisher almost shouted. "Now, by God, it's all over between us. I'll take the ring and we'll call it quits."

Arlene Williams stamped her small foot against the deck.

"Ralph Adams is a much finer person than you will ever be."

"Shut up!"

The girl drew the engagement ring from her finger. Her lips quivered angrily. Fire flashed from the brown eyes.

"Don't ever speak to me again," she said. "Take your ring and—and toss it into the water if you want to."

Her sharp heels clicked firmly against the deck. Fisher had one glimpse of smooth, silken legs as she rounded the deck house. Then he was alone.

The ferry ploughed slowly ahead. Fisher leaned over the rail staring moodily into the oily waters. With a gesture of resignation he tossed the ring into the water and watched the flash of the small stone as it sank.

Below deck, bells started ringing

loudly. Fisher glanced toward the wheel house, a puzzled frown on his face. The ferry wouldn't land for several minutes yet. He heard the captain shout hoarsely from the top-deck.

"Ahoy there, come about, or you'll run us down!"

THE stout officer was leaning over the rail above Fisher's head, a megaphone held tightly to his lips. Fisher tried to see through the fog ahead but the wet vapor curtain hid everything. The engines stopped abruptly and the ferry floated slowly ahead. He could hear the passengers gathering behind him, the excited whispers near his elbow. Then a strange, weather-beaten ship struck the side of the ferry and scraped slowly along the rail. Long grappling hooks flew from above, caught on the rail and drew the two vessels tightly together.

The ship—from what he could make out through the mist—was like nothing Robert Fisher had ever seen. It towered above them, the brightly colored sails partly hidden in the fog. From its masts, like something from a pirate book, canvas flapped idly in the slowly rising breeze.

The captain of the ferry was cursing loudly. Then a man leaned over the rail of the sailing vessel. He was dressed in an oddly pointed hat with a red plume. His coat, fashioned from blue velvet, had lace cuffs and a white lace collar about the neck. The stranger's face, that of a man of about fifty, held a strange, sad quality that puzzled Robert Fisher.

The man's eyes studied the deck of the ferry and suddenly met Fisher's gaze. He turned and spoke to someone out of sight behind him in a strange tongue that Fisher could not understand.

Robert Fisher felt his knees go sud-

denly weak. He wanted to turn and run, yet stood waiting, as though hypnotized by what was taking place.

The ferry captain was still sputtering. Commuters moved away quickly and took refuge in the main cabin.

"Get that blasted carnival ship out of the way!" the captain howled. "You've got harbor traffic tied up."

The man on the ship ignored him. It was as though only one man were visible to his eyes.

"You're name is Fisher—Robert Fisher?" he called.

Fisher nodded slightly, and then wished he hadn't.

"Good! Prepare to come aboard."

"Come aboard?" Fisher gulped. Suddenly there was a deep, terrible fear within him.

He saw the two seamen as they swung over the rail and clambered down to him. Their dress was simple, crude. Bright bandanas were wrapped tightly around their heads. They carried long, glittering cutlasses.

"I—I don't understand." Fisher, still wanting to run, reached up and grasped the wet ladder dangling from the mystery ship's rail above him.

"There is no time for explanations," the man on the ship said. "You are to come aboard at once."

The seamen were at his side now, ready to carry out their orders.

Fisher had a strange feeling that he was suddenly living a dream. He started to climb up the rungs of the rope ladder. Once he had gained the railing, he looked back and saw Arlene Williams running along the deck of the ferry toward him. There was fright in her eyes.

"Bob!" she shouted. "Bob, come back!"

Already her voice sounded far away, as in another world. He had no control of his own emotions. The whole thing

was like a shock to his body, leaving him with no will to act as his own master.

"Please, Bob!" Arlene's voice rose to a scream of terror. "Get off that ship!"

HE WAS standing at the rail. Beside him, the strangely dressed captain of the old vessel stood watching him intently. Seamen were rushing about the deck. The whistles and sounds of the harbor were growing faint. When he looked again the ferry had disappeared. Only the faint, rippling blackness of water was below. He looked up at straight masts and slowly filling sails. Wind was sending the fog up in snake-like wisps and the whole length of the polished deck was visible. Then the strange sails filled and billowed out. They snapped and creaked in the wind. The fresh air blowing in Fisher's face brought his senses back to him.

He turned to the strange captain.

Before he could open his lips to protest the man spoke to him.

"I know the *Oriental* seems a strange ship to you. We have a long voyage to make. However I give you my promise that I am your friend. You shall have an explanation after you have rested awhile."

Rested? Fisher thought he would rest like a caged animal, brought here almost against his will and trapped as surely as though ten feet of concrete separated him from the things he knew.

Why he had come he couldn't guess, unless, in his own anger toward Arlene, he thought that any escape from the old routine would offer him relief.

CHAPTER III

Second Passenger

THE building was on the New Orleans waterfront. The night was

foggy and dark. A single light burned on the second floor, sending a pale yellow gleam across the dark water below the pier. The door to the lighted room was stenciled *Laird and Wedge—Marine Insurance*.

The title was misleading. Jim Wedge was no longer a partner. He and Laird had broken their partnership a little over an hour before. It was a bitter parting, filled with accusations and anger.

Laird, a stout, bald-headed man of forty had started James Wedge in business five years ago. Wedge had plenty of ability, but he also had a bad temper. It flared often, and usually beyond his control.

Laird sat stiffly behind the desk as Wedge, mouthing a steady tirade of abuse, paced the floor.

"And I say I borrowed the cash honestly and will leave the full sum, plus interest, at the bank on Monday," Laird said quietly.

Jim Wedge, tall and brown-skinned, whirled about, his blue eyes boring angrily into Laird's. He pounded on the desk top with his fist.

"We were partners," he shouted. "You had no right to take that money without consulting me first."

"I told you before," Laird answered quietly, "that since you didn't plan to come home until tonight, I knew of no way to consult you first. I had the chance to make an investment that will net plenty. The money is safe. I have a receipt for it from one of the city's biggest brokers."

"That's not the point," Wedge persisted. "We agreed to handle the company funds together. It's the principle of the thing. I say that in taking the money without my knowledge, you committed a breach of trust."

"You're a hot-headed young fool!" Laird stood up, leaning on the desk.

His breath was beginning to come hard. "Rules are fine, but when you've lived a few years longer, you'll find they occasionally have to be changed to fit the case."

"Damn you, Laird!" Wedge's face turned brick-red. "You're a smooth one. How do I know you'll return the money?"

Laird's fists tightened but his voice remained under control.

"I've taken enough of your talk," he said. "That finishes it. You and I are washed up—finished. I'll have the full amount of the check sent to your bank on Monday. From now on the partnership is dissolved."

"And good riddance," Wedge said testily.

He snatched his hat from the desk, wheeled about and slammed the door behind him as he went into the hall. He walked swiftly downstairs and out into the darkness. He groped his way across the planking of the wharf toward the gate to the street. Blinded by the fog and his own anger he couldn't find the gate in the blackness. He wandered about slowly, trying to locate the fence. He was afraid to get too close to the edge of the wharf. No one would be around to lend a hand if he fell into the bay.

He hesitated, trying to get his bearings by sound. The faint splashing of water came from below him. A fog horn was roaring in the distance. There was a boat somewhere near. He could hear the water lapping against its sides and the scraping of oars as they rubbed in invisible oarlocks.

A voice spoke to him from the water.

"You're name is Wedge?"

He whirled around, cold sweat on his forehead.

"Who are you?" he demanded hoarsely.

"The ship is waiting for you in the

harbor," the voice said.

WEDGE waited silently. The sound of the oars was stilled. He wondered if Laird had promoted some wild scheme to be rid of him. Then, hearing footsteps near him in the fog, he turned and started to run. His shoe caught between the planks and he went down heavily.

"No one will harm you." The same voice, low and cultured, was close to him. "You are needed to make my voyage successful."

He struggled to his feet. A rough hand was on his shoulder and he lashed out with his fist, trying to find the body behind it. Something hit him on the head and he slumped down, white-hot pain in his head.

Wedge was sure that he didn't entirely lose consciousness, yet when he was again in possession of his senses, he was in a small boat. Wedge lifted himself carefully from the planks. He stared uncertainly at the man opposite him.

"I'm sorry my men had to treat you roughly," the stranger said. "But I could not risk losing you. I have searched for a long time."

"If Dave Laird is in on this," Wedge said angrily, "I'll see him in hell for his trouble."

He couldn't make sense of his surroundings. The man near him was dressed in Seventeenth Century Dutch clothing. He looked like something from the Mardi Gras with plumed hat, velvet coat and breeches worn above white silk stockings. His shoes were square-toed and topped with silver buckles.

"I know not of a Dave Laird," he said. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Captain Hans Vanderdecken of the good ship *Oriental*."

"Cut the comic opera," Wedge said.

The boat was cutting the water swiftly, two men at the oars. Wedge waited for some chance to escape. The boat slowed and drifted now. A voice called out from above them. It was in a foreign tongue that Wedge could not understand.

"Aye," the Dutchman answered. "We've found our man."

Wedge strained his eyes toward the rough planked sides of the vessel. Above his head was a row of cannon, different from any he had ever seen, jutting from the side of the craft. He heard sails snapping gently in the fog and the steady creak of masts as they leaned to the breeze.

Suddenly Wedge sprang to his feet and jumped into the water. Before he could take more than a few swimming strokes, however, he felt a crushing blow on his head. These beggars were handy with a belaying pin. The water started to creep over his face and a strong arm went around his neck. After that he choked from the water he had swallowed and heard far away voices, as though in a dream. Try as he might, Jim Wedge could fight no more. Abruptly, his senses left him.

CHAPTER IV

Pair of Pawns

ROBERT FISHER awakened from a troubled sleep. He climbed wearily from the rude bunk, realizing that for the first time in many hours the *Oriental* was in quiet waters. Fisher was no sailor. The nightly trip on the Jersey Ferry was his one contact with boats. Just how long he had been on the *Oriental*, he couldn't guess. They had locked him in a tiny cabin below deck where he had awakened only long enough to be sick, sinking into a deep slumber when his stomach calmed. His

sole companion, a small black kitten, was poor company.

He knew little of Captain Vanderdecken and still less of the crew. There had been no explanation given and Fisher was much too sick to care what had happened since he left the ferry.

Now that the ship no longer swayed and groaned in the wind, he felt better. There were voices outside the hull of vessel. At first he hoped a rescue party was boarding the *Oriental*. Then footsteps sounded on the deck above.

He had not attempted to leave the cabin before. To his surprise, the door was unlocked. He stepped outside, staggered and clutched the wall to keep from falling. The black kitten rubbed on his shoes and purred contentedly. Fisher walked slowly along the dark passage outside the cabin, saw light sifting down the stairs ahead of him and went toward it. Footsteps were descending the steps. He moved swiftly into the shadows below the stairs and waited. Two seamen came down, carrying the limp, water-soaked figure of a tall young man. They passed Fisher's hiding place, entered a cabin across the passage-way and came out without their captive. He waited, holding his breath as they came near him and went back up to the deck.

Fisher walked hesitantly toward the cabin. He pushed the door open quickly and stepped inside. The man jumped from his bunk, fists clenched, and staggered toward him.

"Who the hell are you?"

Fisher grinned.

"A friend in need," he said sourly. "We both seem to be in—or on—the same boat. My name is Robert Fisher."

James Wedge relaxed.

"My name's Wedge," he said slowly.

"Jim Wedge. Did they kidnap you?"

Fisher nodded.

"Took me from New York Harbor

in a fog," he said. "It's all so damned puzzling."

Wedge sat down and started to remove his water-soaked clothing.

"For me, too," he said. "Did you say you were from New York?"

"Right," Fisher answered. "Worked for the *News*. I was on the ferry headed for Jersey, when this boat picked me up."

Wedge looked up, puzzled.

"I can't make it out," he admitted. "Here we are in New Orleans. Why in hell did they come all the way down the coast and into the gulf just to find me. We must have been chosen pretty carefully for whatever use they intend to put us to."

Fisher stood quietly as Wedge removed his outer clothing and placed it over the edge of the bunk where it would dry.

"You're sure this is New Orleans?" he asked.

Wedge scowled.

"I was in my office half an hour ago," he said. "I ought to know."

Fisher's eyes wandered about the cabin.

"I guess I've been on board two or three days," he said, in offering an explanation. "I've been sick most of the time. The only man who seems to be able to talk English is the captain. He won't tell me why I am here or what's in store for me. He did say that he was my friend and that I need not fear him."

Wedge chuckled.

"I left behind an incident in my life that wasn't very pleasant," he said. "I'm not so sure that I'm sorry for all this, now that I've had some time to think it over."

Fisher seemed a little startled at Jim Wedge's confession. He remembered his own quarrel with Arlene. When he thought of it that way, there *wasn't*

much left for him in New York.

WEDGE was busy over a small sea-chest in the corner.

"It seems we have clothing," he said. "That is, if we're not fussy."

He pulled out a pair of blue trousers, a striped red-and-white shirt and started to put them on. Half-way through the task, he hesitated, bent over and drew a small paper ticket from the chest. He studied it, then passed the slip to Fisher.

"Can you make anything of this?"

Fisher studied the slip.

"Written in Dutch," he said. "I know that much. Can't read it, though. *Wait!*"

He studied the paper more closely. His face turned white and he read in a harsh, low voice.

"Good ship, *Oriental*, Captain Hans Vanderdecken in command, the year of 1648." Fisher hesitated, looking up. "That much is clear enough."

Jim Wedge's face mirrored his bewilderment.

"Brother!" he said in a shocked voice. "Ships don't sail around for three centuries."

All trace of humor was wiped clean from Fisher's face. He stood very still, listening to the wind as it hissed through the sails above deck. The cabin was silent, save for the steady creaking of the masts. There was a high sea running, rolling the *Oriental* slowly from side to side.

"I wish we were sure of that," he said huskily. "I—wish—we—were—sure."

CHAPTER V

"We'll Singe a Mangy Beard"

WHAT greeting they would receive from the ship's captain, Jim Wedge and Robert Fisher didn't know. Together, they decided to face Captain Vanderdecken and demand an explan-

ation. Fisher stepped into the sunlight of the upper deck first. The *Oriental* was at sea. As far as the eye could see, green-rolling water swept away to the horizon. The men of the ship were busy, hurrying about the deck in a workmanlike manner. They paid no attention to the two Americans who advanced hesitantly across the rolling deck.

Wedge stretched himself carefully, breathing deeply of the clean air.

"Damned if I know where we are," he said. "But it's the first good air I've had today. I've a feeling this isn't going to be half bad."

Captain Vanderdecken saw them from his post on the quarter-deck. He approached with the rolling easy stride of a man long accustomed to ships. The wind had whipped new color into his cheeks and his eyes were sparkling.

"You have both rested, I see."

Jim Wedge took command of the conversation automatically. There was something in his superior size and commanding personality that made Robert Fisher happy to let the big man handle his interests.

"Captain," Wedge said firmly, "you've treated us well enough. Aside from that crack on the head, I've no kick coming. What do you propose doing with us, now that your job of kidnapping has been successful?"

Vanderdecken remained silent, as though planning just what explanation he should give. Seamen passed them, so intent on their work that they did not seem to notice the presence of strangers on board. Fisher watched the men of the *Oriental* with gradually growing concern. More and more he became sure that were he invisible they could pay no less attention to him. At last Vanderdecken spoke, his voice hesitant as though not knowing how much to tell them.

"I know that the hardest part of my mission is to free you men from worry. Unfortunately I cannot tell you everything that will become more evident in days to come. Until an explanation can be given, please trust me"

"Hold it!" Wedge interrupted angrily. "You're not telling us a thing. Are we to consider ourselves your prisoners?"

Vanderdecken's eyes snapped suddenly and an expression of anger became visible on his face.

"I had hoped that time would change many things," he said bitterly. "I find the same intolerance still waiting to keep me from my goal. Yes, gentlemen, if you choose to be unfriendly, consider yourself my prisoners until further notice."

"You refuse to tell us why we were brought aboard your ship?"

"I think it unwise at present," Vanderdecken snapped. "Your only contact is with me. The men are Dutch. They will ignore you until such time as I give them instructions to do otherwise. You will do exactly as I say."

"Then, damn you," Wedge said, taking a threatening step forward, "you may expect nothing but trouble from us. I, for one, will not be dragged about the seven seas. I'll take the first opportunity to escape that presents itself."

Vanderdecken stared at him.

"That would be unwise," he said gently. "If you will look at the rather crude calendar that I keep carved in the main-mast, you will note the date as March first, the year as 1648. I'm afraid, gentlemen, that the calendar is accurate enough to assure you of being picked up by some Spanish galleon or slave ship whose captain would not treat you so well as I intend to."

Fisher remembered the tag in the small chest below deck. His eyes widened in sudden fear. Wedge was not

so easily frightened.

"And *I* say you're a liar!" he stormed. "The days of fairy tales are over. This tub may be dressed up like a flagship of the Spanish Armada. It proves nothing to me, except you and your crew are a bunch of screwballs."

CAPTAIN VANDERDECKEN seemed indifferent to this last outburst. His eyes were focused on a tiny black dot that was growing against the horizon. Now he drew a metal tube from his pocket and walked quickly toward the rail. The tube was about two feet long, hollow, and bound with brass rings. He stood there for some time, and when he turned back to his prisoners, there was a strange glint in his eyes.

"They call this a Dutch trunk," he said, holding the instrument out to Wedge. "Fate has ruled that our first meeting with the accursed Dons would be at this point. If you will look at the approaching galleon through this, I'm sure you'll accept as true what I told you a few moments ago."

Jim Wedge snatched the glass from him and stared through it toward the other ship. A frown crossed his face and he handed the tube to Fisher.

Silently, Fisher stared through the glass at the speck on the sea. Although blurred and imperfect, the image he saw was a huge, black-decked galley, resplendent with bright sails, carved figure-head and a row of black-muzzled cannon that protruded from her sides just below the rail. He turned, the glass held limply in his fingers.

"I guess," he said in a low voice, "that does it. I'm damned sure this isn't *my* idea of 1943."

Wedge was glaring fiercely at the captain.

"I'm still not so sure that this isn't some sort of a DeMille production," he

said angrily.

Vanderdecken looked puzzled.

"DeMille?"

Wedge shrugged.

"Forget it, Captain. What do we do now?"

Vanderdecken took the glass once more and studied the Spanish ship for several minutes.

"Equip yourselves with cutlasses from the sea chest below deck," he said abruptly. "We shall engage the *Donna Marie* before the day is over."

Wedge seemed surprised.

"And just what would the *Donna Marie*—I take it that's yonder boat's name—want with this old tub?"

Vanderdecken wet his lips.

"There are many things you do not know concerning our ship. For one, we are carrying silver bars in the hold. Philip of Spain needs silver badly. We'll singe his mangy beard before the sun sets this day."

CHAPTER VI

Baptism of Fire

"NIGHTMARE or not," Jim Wedge said to Fisher. "We sure as hell are gonna fight that Spanish ship."

Several hours had passed since their conversation with the captain. During that time, sea chests were broken out and cutlasses distributed to all the men. The gun deck was seething with life. Shot and powder were dragged up from below and everything movable was battened down tightly.

"They say the pen is mightier than the sword," Fisher said, running his finger along the sharp edge of a cutlass. "Right now I wish I'd taken fencing in high school."

The *Donna Marie* was half a mile to the rear and coming up fast. Fisher and Wedge were drawn close by their

common danger. Fisher, smaller and less imaginative, left leadership to his stronger companion. Wedge, in turn, liked the smaller man because of his ready laugh and his willingness to see everything in the best light possible.

They had talked long and calmly of their situation, and decided to make the best of it.

To Wedge's surprise, although Vanderdecken had prepared for battle, the Dutchman kept his ship under a full head of canvas and was making a run for it. Toward five o'clock they saw Vanderdecken coming toward them across the quarter deck. He carried a brace of pistols in his sash and the heavy cutlass dragged against his hip as he walked. There was no alarm in his voice as he greeted them.

"I see you are both armed. The *Donna Marie* will be within range in half an hour if the wind holds. I attempted to out-run her, although I knew it would be useless."

Wedge interrupted him.

"As little as I know about ships," he protested. "Surely this small ship can be equipped to outsail so large a vessel?"

Vanderdecken shrugged.

"It has been thus before," he said. "Fate decided my first voyage; the others are patterned after it. You had best be resigned to defend yourselves."

He stared at the *Donna Marie*, now almost within firing distance.

"Just what is to prevent our ship escaping?" Fisher asked.

"You will understand all these things in due course," the Dutchman said. "Meanwhile, be careful. The Spaniards fight trickily, so keep a wall at your back lest they strike from behind."

He wheeled and left them alone. Fisher stared at Jim Wedge.

"I'm damned," he said, "if I like this. I wonder if he really wants us to come

through this alive?"

THE *Oriental* was ready for battle. Men with loaded muskets swarmed high into the shrouds, ready to fire down on the deck of the *Donna Marie*. The ship's sixteen small cannon were loaded, and sweating, grim-faced gunners were ready to light the fuses. Wedge, keeping his post at the deck house, watched with fascination as the *Donna Marie* came abreast of them. The side of the huge galley was bristling with guns. Men, their heads bound in bright cloth, stood with cutlasses in their teeth, ready to board. He heard the thin, high notes of a horn sound across the water.

Vanderdecken was everywhere, keeping his men in check, watching every inch that the Spaniard gained as it swing along-side. The *Donna Marie* loosed its first broadside and the sky was suddenly black with smoke as the cannon belched their loads. The shots fell into the water, fifty yards short of the *Oriental's* hull.

"Good!" Vanderdecken shouted. "Let the fools waste their ammunition."

"That guy's got guts," Wedge said, and Fisher nodded.

"Either that, or he isn't much worried about this attack."

Wedge looked thoughtful.

"You'd think he'd been through the same thing before," he said. "Nothing surprised him from the first."

The *Donna Marie* was close in now. She heeled over stiffly before the wind, coming on confidently as though all ready to board. The cannon roared again and shot ripped through the upper sails, sending shredded canvas fluttering to the deck. Somewhere aloft, a man screamed and his body hurtled down. Blood spattered as he hit the deck.

Below, the *Oriental's* guns awakened

and sent a volley across the water. Wedge could see them hit and bounce away from the *Donna Marie*. Some found their mark and wood splinters flew into the air. The main-mast of the *Donna Marie* crumpled suddenly and crashed to the deck. The sails dipped and dropped into the sea. Men swarmed over the wreckage, cutting the mast loose from the deck.

A cheer went up from the *Oriental's* gun deck and a new volley followed the first.

The *Donna Marie* was so close, now, that her sails mingled with the *Oriental's* canvas and the red and yellow standards, flying from her masts, were almost over Fisher's head. The ships hit and grappling irons flew through the air to draw them tight. The guns of the *Donna Marie* were pointed high in the air, where they could do nothing but pound at the *Oriental's* masts.

The *Oriental* had one chance. Her own cannon were directed low, in a position to blast away at the hull of the Spaniard. As long as they were in action, Captain Vanderdecken had a slim chance.

Fisher grasped the hilt of his cutlass and waited. Ahead of him, Wedge swung his weapon wide and sprang toward the first Spaniard to come aboard. The crew of the *Donna Marie* swarmed down the ropes or leaped straight from the rail to the deck of the *Oriental*. Vanderdecken, three men at his side, dashed into the melee with pistols roaring. Men were shouting oaths, screaming and dying about him. Fisher saw Wedge forced slowly backward by the expert blades of the enemy. Wedge was getting the worst of it.

SUDDENLY awake to the desperate situation his friend was in, Fisher ran forward, swinging the cutlass with anger that amazed him. The fury of

his attack sent Wedge's adversary reeling back and Fisher's blade plunged into the Spaniard's throat. Wedge gained time, pivoted and took on another fighter. He plunged the blade deep, ripped it out savagely and lunged again. It was like a terrible dream. Time after time he wiped the sweat from his eyes, saw the blurry figure of another Spaniard rushing him, and fought wildly to preserve his own life. Always Fisher was near and ready to take advantage of every opening.

"Stick close!" Wedge managed to gasp. "We may . . . have a . . . chance!"

Fisher stuck. Below deck, the guns kept up their murderous steady pounding. The deck was slippery with blood. Fisher skidded and fell, staining his coat with the warm moistness of blood.

Fisher, surprised that he was still alive, felt a new, fierce resentment for the men of the *Donna Marie*. The Dons, Vanderdecken had called them. Each time his cutlass took a Spaniard's life, his heart pounded with the excitement of battle.

"*She's going down!*"

He heard the high, shrill voice above the clanging weapons. It rose and swelled from the throats of desperate men.

"The *Donna Marie* is sinking!"

Baroom!

The cannon roared again and again, ripping huge holes into the stricken Spaniard. Both Americans were aware of a new spirit about them. The Spaniards turned and ran as though the Devil were in pursuit. Some fell back, fighting as they went, trying to regain the decks of their own vessel. High in the masts the banner of King Philip of Spain was cut loose and fluttered down.

Abruptly the balance of the enemy broke and fled. They swarmed over the

rail of their own vessel, some of them falling into the narrow chasm of water between the ships. Vanderdecken, his coat torn and blood-soaked, was visible again. Seemingly satisfied at the turn of events, he turned toward his own remaining men.

"Free the grappling hooks," he shouted. "She's heeling over."

Fisher rushed in with the men, tearing the grappling irons away and dropping them into the sea. They worked furiously, and one by one the irons clanked free and rattled down the side of the ship into the water.

The *Oriental* was free. The force of the *Donna Marie*, pushing against her side, sent the Dutch galiot sidewise and clear of the enemy vessel. Few of the Spaniards had escaped to their own deck without wounds. The *Oriental* swung around slowly like a wounded animal and drifted free. A bare hundred feet separated the two ships. The *Donna Marie* tipped far over, the huge gap in her side already below the waterline. A boat swung free from her and bobbed across the water. A white flag hung limply at the bow.

"Give them a taste of grape!" Vanderdecken shouted. "Let none escape that bloody hell-ship!"

Fisher watched the men in the boat as she drew close. He pitied the poor devils, and yet, had they not tried to murder them all?

Sick revulsion twisted within him as a single cannon exploded and sent grape shot into the doomed boat. A broken, bloody mass of wreckage, it sank quickly, leaving no trace. His eyes shifted to the *Donna Marie*. The galleon heeled far over and slipped quietly beneath the waves. A cheer went up around him.

JIM WEDGE had his hat in one hand, cutlass swinging limply in the

other. There was something about Wedge, standing strong and undaunted in the midst of death, that sent a shiver up Fisher's spine. It reminded him of something or someone he had seen once before. Some bit of bloody glory that he had witnessed as in a dimly remembered dream.

Fisher fancied at that moment that Wedge, and not Vanderdecken, controlled the fate of the *Oriental*. He was proud of his companion, and yet filled with a fear that he could not explain.

Wedge turned and approached him with graceful, firm steps.

"It's to hell for the *Donna Marie*," he said crisply. "Thanks for the help when I needed it most. I hope they can get this tub back into sailing condition."

Fisher leaned weakly against the rail.

"I guess we've had our baptism of fire," he said.

"But good," Wedge replied gruffly. "Bob, this beats selling insurance after all. Let old Vanderdecken keep his secret for a while. I'm beginning to enjoy life aboard the *Oriental*."

Fisher wondered. Wedge was so damned cock-sure of himself. He closed his eyes, trying to refresh a fuzzy memory. It was useless. Wedge fitted into this as though he were meant for it. He couldn't toss away the idea that he had seen Wedge like this before, self-assured, ready to plunge into battle with the odds ten-to-one against him.

"*Hell for the Donna Marie*," Fisher repeated softly to himself. "*I wonder if this is only the beginning.*"

CHAPTER VII

Blood of Mutiny

WEDGE said, "I'm sure that the sinking of the *Donna Marie* was no surprise to Captain Vanderdecken."

Fisher nodded in agreement.

"I remember how he seemed to anticipate every move," he agreed. "We were fighting terrific odds, and yet he never faltered. Yet, I'll swear he's not the type that likes a fight."

It was late in the afternoon, the third day after the battle. The Americans were stretched full length across the main hatch, staring at a cloudless, empty sky. The *Oriental's* masts were patched and repaired and almost all trace of the battle had been removed. The deck-house still showed jagged holes where cannon balls had blasted through it.

The *Oriental* had been quiet, almost too quiet for the past two days. Although they understood nothing of what the crew said, men had gathered in little groups and talked among themselves until they were ordered apart by the mate. They lounged about afterwards with scowling faces.

Several times since the battle, Fisher had caught the mate, a huge Dutchman named Hendrik von Rundstad, staring at him as though puzzled by his presence. Von Rundstad had a sour, unhealthy look about him that worried both Fisher and Wedge.

Fisher agreed with Wedge on the subject of Captain Vanderdecken. The captain had a manner of dashing away in time to stop some minor disturbance. Each time, he returned to them with a satisfied smile, as though his life was being lived with a precision that satisfied him.

"Jim," Fisher said suddenly. "Has it occurred to you that we're taking all this pretty calmly?"

Wedge rolled over on his side and scowled.

"I don't know that I understand you."

Fisher sat up.

"I mean, being thrown into this im-

possible situation. A couple of business men torn up by the roots and tossed into the past. We go on as though nothing had happened, and yet Vanderdecken refuses to tell us a thing. Why do we go on as though we were actually . . ."

He hesitated and Wedge smiled.

"As though we enjoyed it?" he offered. "To tell the truth, Bob, I do get a kick out of this new life of mine. I got mixed up in an unpleasant situation in New Orleans. That battle with the *Donna Marie* satisfied something inside of me. It brought a content that I've never known after any undertaking I've been through before."

"I know," Fisher said impatiently. "But the future—what of that?"

"Let the future take care of itself," Wedge urged. "The captain has a plan. How he engineered all this is beyond me. The past is cut off and we can't return to it. Either we follow the path he has suggested or we'll lose what little sanity we have left. There's no choice."

Fisher got to his feet.

"Another thing!" he said. "These Dutchmen are planning trouble. I don't like the looks of that goon, Hendrick von Rundstad. Every time he looks at me, I feel a rope around my neck."

Wedge allowed an unconcerned grin to twist his lips.

"Von Rundstad isn't so tough," he said. "I've a hunch we can handle him if he starts anything."

It was dark, now, and they crossed the deck slowly, watching the stars as they grew brighter above the whipping sails.

Just before Wedge slept, his mind wandered to Dave Laird and the fight they had had not so many days ago.

"Maybe not an easier life," he said aloud. "But a damn sight more interesting one."

Fisher stirred in his sleep and muttered something Wedge couldn't make out.

"Nothing," Wedge said. "Get some sleep, boy. I'm just thinking out loud."

IT WAS close to morning when Wedge awakened. He sat up quickly, ears and eyes alert to the faint sounds above. He reached for his cutlass. The sounds came again, padded footsteps on the deck.

Wedge arose swiftly and slipped into the boots that the sea-chest had supplied. He decided against awakening Fisher. There was probably no reason for alarm.

He reached the deck swiftly and stood deep in the shadows of the hatch way. Shadowy forms were crossing the planks, converging near Captain Vanderdecken's cabin. The gray light of dawn was visible, and the ship rocked and bucked gently in the wind. Wedge waited, then saw von Rundstad, the mate, knocking on Vanderdecken's door.

They closed in like a silent wolf pack. Wedge wondered how he could know so much about these men and what they were thinking. He was sure it was mutiny. The mate carried a cutlass in one hand and a pistol in the other. The men carried on a whispered conversation that, even if Wedge were able to hear the words if he were closer, he would not have understood.

Wedge saw a lantern light up through the window. He held his cutlass tightly, waiting. Captain Hans Vanderdecken stepped out of the door, bathed in the yellow rays of the lantern. Neither surprise nor fear showed in his expression. His voice was low and controlled, and several of the crew stepped away from him, as though impressed with his argument. The men were hesitant, but von Rundstad stepped forward,

pistol leveled at Vanderdecken's chest.

A horrible fury filled Wedge and he sprang forward. The crew shouted their encouragement to the mate and Wedge heard the pistol roar. He stopped short, saw the captain pitch forward on his face and lay still.

Wedge knew that thus far the crew had not noticed his approach. Armed only with the blade, he would stand no chance in fighting them. He turned and slipped back into the shadows of the deck house. Two men were dragging Vanderdecken back into his cabin. The group was dispersing. The mate entered the cabin and for several minutes there was activity around the lantern inside. Then the light faded and the two men followed von Rundstad to the deck. They were headed directly toward Wedge. He went down the stairs quickly, and back into the cabin where Fisher was still sleeping. He bolted the door and waited. They did not follow and for a long time he sat alone, waiting for Fisher to awaken. The sun came up at last, with the glinting hardness of copper. Fisher rolled uneasily in his sleep and muttered under his breath.

WHEN Bob Fisher awakened, Wedge was still sitting on the edge of the bunk. He said nothing until Fisher was dressed and about to go on deck. Then he said:

"Von Rundstad and the crew have mutinied. Captain Vanderdecken is in his cabin, either dead or badly wounded."

Fisher turned, his eyes showing alarm.

"How did you . . ."

"I awakened when it happened," Wedge went on. "I let you sleep because there was nothing we could do about it."

"Now we are in trouble," Fisher

said. "The more we see on this ship, the less I understand."

He wandered across the cabin, turned and paced back again as though afraid to go beyond the door.

"We've lost our last chance to escape," he said. "Von Rundstad will get rid of us fast, now that he has control of the ship."

Wedge stood up and went to the port-hole. He stared out at the sea.

"I'm not so sure," he mused. "Von Rundstad had plenty of time to kill us this morning. He's left us completely alone. I stayed awake to make sure he would."

Fisher scowled.

"Don't you believe it," he cautioned. "He'll take care of us when the time comes."

CHAPTER VIII

The Bloody Rock

THE *Oriental* had good sailing weather for the next week. Those seven days were a nightmare for Bob Fisher. Wedge felt a little better, though his ability to feel at home on the ship helped somewhat. They were allowed the full freedom of the deck. Food was brought to their cabin as usual and the crew maintained complete silence. Vanderdecken was missing but his absence was the only change.

Wedge tried on two occasions to reach the captain's door. Each time he was turned away by the appearance of half a dozen husky seamen. Yet he was sure that Vanderdecken was yet alive. Food was taken to his cabin twice daily, and by the middle of the week he could be seen moving about inside.

Von Rundstad was in complete charge of the ship. He pushed the men every hour of the day, keeping the *Oriental*

under a full head of canvas. The big ugly Dutchman carried both pistols and cutlass constantly and swaggered about the decks at all hours.

To help Vanderdecken was out of the question. The two Americans were fortunate to have saved their own necks. They went about the ship quietly, taking what food was offered them and avoiding von Rundstad. The mate paid them no more attention than if they hadn't existed at all.

Slowly, Fisher's interest in the sea grew, until life was more bearable for him. He and Wedge spent long hours mastering the ways of the Dutch galiot. Wedge taught him the use of the cutlass and they both hardened themselves to the life they were living.

The second week crept by and the *Oriental* still tossed and bucked its way southward on an empty sea. On the eighth day, Fisher was leaning over the rail, watching gulls that flew in from the east. Against the horizon a huge, black rock appeared, rearing upward into the sky as they came closer. Fisher rushed to the cabin and awakened Wedge, who had been resting throughout the afternoon.

"Gibraltar!" Fisher shouted. "We're headed for Gibraltar!"

Wedge sat up dazedly.

"You're nuts," he protested. "You can't cross the Atlantic in less than a month on a tub like this."

Fisher was too excited to be easily discouraged.

"I saw it, I tell you." He hauled Wedge to his feet. "It's ahead and slightly to the east of us. You can spot it without the glass."

With one landmark, one familiar thing to base their hopes on, both men rushed to the deck. The *Oriental* had come around and Gibraltar, stark and black against the sky, lay dead ahead. Even Wedge could no longer doubt after

that first look. He stared for a long time, some of the bewilderment leaving his face.

"Do you realize that to sail here from New Orleans would take months on this vessel?"

Fisher waited. His own ignorance of the sea forbade any reply. Wedge grasped his shoulders, staring at him with wonderment in his eyes.

"You know what that means?"

Fisher shook his head.

"It doesn't make sense to me," he confessed.

Wedge retained his grip. An awed look filled his eyes.

"We didn't sail from home," he said in a low voice. "This is the last proof we need that this voyage is beyond understanding. The *Oriental* is a Dutch ship. We fought the *Donna Marie* a few days after we left port. In 1648 the Spaniards fought Dutch and English ships as soon as they came into Spanish waters. I tell you, Bob, this thing is beginning to make sense, and I don't like it."

HIS hands dropped to his side and he leaned over the rail with eyes glued on the huge rock ahead.

"It doesn't add up for me," Fisher confessed. "What are you getting at?"

Wedge whirled around.

"We're in the past, all right," he said in a hushed voice. "We're headed into the Mediterranean, just as Dutch and English ships did centuries before our time. Vanderdecken told us we were here for a purpose. We're a couple of pawns to be played when the time is ripe."

"We can make a break for it at Gibraltar," Fisher suggested. "There's a narrow strait there. We could jump ship and swim ashore."

"No good," Wedge's lips tightened. "If I'm right, and we've no reason to

think otherwise, this is Gibraltar of the Seventeenth century. The Bloody Rock, ruled by cutthroats and pirates. A thousand miles of hell on either side, one over-run by Berbers and Moslems, and on the other, King Philip of Spain with his armies."

Fisher had no answer. He was staring at the towering stone giant that grew larger as the *Oriental* swept onward ahead of a fresh, strong wind.

CHAPTER IX

The Basket

CAPTAIN HANS VANDER-DECKEN was on deck again. He had been escorted from his cabin each morning for a week, by two husky seamen. There was a difference in the spirit of the men on board. They still obeyed von Rundtsad, but the man was so overbearing that hatred seemed to be growing against him. The galiot had been anchored for a week in a small cove on the Spanish coast. The mate was waiting for something. Perhaps he feared the passage through the Inland Sea until such time as the *Oriental* could be repaired for the journey.

Twice, Fisher had seen men whipped by the mate himself, who wielded the cat-o-nine tails with the dexterity born of long practice. The crew grew weary of him. More and more, Fisher felt, Vanderdecken was taking over his old place at the helm.

Sunday afternoon was hot and still. The sun burned down, blistering the planks of the deck and sending men over the side into the cool water. Vanderdecken was much better. Although he had been allowed to talk with no one but the two who guarded him, the captain had a new look of confidence about him as he walked about the deck in the quiet of the afternoon.

A tension sprang up, as though wills were about to clash and no one would guess from where the storm would first come. Captain Hans Vanderdecken left his cabin, alone. The mate was sitting by himself on the steps that led to the quarter deck. Vanderdecken walked toward him slowly and several of the crew fell in behind. Fisher edged closer, careful to keep out of the group of grim-faced men.

Vanderdecken halted a few steps from the mate and spoke to him in a calm voice. Von Rundstad had evidently been dozing in the sun. He sprang to his feet, jerking his cutlass free of his sash. With legs braced well apart, he faced the members of the crew who gradually moved in behind their captain.

He bellowed something in a loud, angry tone and took a threatening step forward. Vanderdecken held his ground. He reached behind him and took the hilt of a blade one of the men held for him. The men backed away slowly and a look of cunning came into von Rundstad's eyes. Fisher, realizing what was about to happen, went closer. He was afraid the Dutch captain was still too weak to face the weapon of the mate.

Vanderdecken danced in swiftly to deliver the first blow and their blades met, von Rundstad's coming down full forcé to be halted in mid-air and pushed aside.

The mate charged like an angry bull, slashing huge arcs in the air but gaining no blood for his trouble. Vanderdecken was fast. The circle of men widened and the captain went in again swiftly, his blade playing a ringing tattoo against the mate's weapon. They fought warily, each dancing about, taking the touch of metal as sparingly as possible. The captain was light on his feet, but the mate, sweating

and swearing under the hot sun, started to blunder and stumble when he was in a tight spot.

How long they parried thrusts, Fisher wasn't sure. The sun grew so hot that he ripped his collar away. His tongue was dry. Still the men danced around each other. Thrust, parry and thrust. Von Rundstad was growing worried. Much heavier than his opponent, he couldn't hope to last much longer. Also, there was the feeling of shocked surprise that his men had turned against him. It shone in his eyes, the look of a betrayer betrayed.

The final blow was swift and came so suddenly that Fisher felt let down and disappointed. He had been hoping for von Rundstad's death. Vanderdecken's weapon darted in swiftly, touched the mate's wrist and it was over. Von Rundstad's cutlass flew from his nerveless fingers and he stood there like a bewildered ape, holding a severed, blood-soaked finger. His wrist was cut to the bone and the finger, where Vanderdecken's weapon had slipped downward, had fallen from the hand completely.

Vanderdecken wiped the blood from his blade and stepped back. He gave a single low command and the crew closed in on von Rundstad.

Fisher turned to go to his cabin. Wedge would want to know that the ship had once more changed command. To his surprise he discovered Jim Wedge had come out on deck and was standing just behind him. The same devil-may-care expression that he had had during the battle of the *Donna Marie*, was on his face.

"I guess Vanderdecken knew what he was talking about when he told us to depend on him," Wedge said. "From our viewpoint, that fight wasn't so much, but considering the times, Vanderdecken is pretty handy with a

steel blade. You saw that, didn't you?"

WITH Hendrik von Rundstad's downfall, the *Oriental* set sail at nightfall under a full head of canvas. Fisher spent hours in the shrouds, his glass trained on the galleys that swept past them toward the African coast. Vanderdecken remained more and more to himself, and never spoke to them, even though he was once more free of his cabin and busy above deck.

Inside the straits, the *Oriental* was left unmolested and kept so true a course that they were sure she was now close to her destination. Wedge was busy below deck, working on a crude calendar he had cut into the beams of the cabin. Fisher watched life on the deck below him. The carpenter was busy building a large cage-like affair of heavy wooden slats. He had worked on it since that morning and the crew detoured widely each time one of them came close to him. There was something about that cage with its solid plank bottom and heavy bars that sent a vague uneasiness through Fisher's mind. The men he had seen today were tight-lipped and grim. The *Oriental* was suddenly a silent, brooding ship.

Wedge came on deck, dressed in new breeches and a pair of high boots. Vanderdecken had supplied them both with new clothing of his own time, and Wedge looked the part of a swash-buckling hero.

Hans Vanderdecken was calling all hands on deck. They lined up, a nervous, bewildered group who knew they deserved punishment and hoped they could evade it.

Hendrick von Rundstad was dragged into the sunlight before them. This was a different man than the swaggering, bullying mate who had engineered mutiny. He staggered and fell

before the captain. When he rose, his shaggy head was bent forward, eyes staring at the deck.

Fisher, climbing down slowly, heard the captain speak and the protesting shout of the mate. It was the first time he had spoken in English.

"Not da basket! Please Cap'n, not da basket!"

Vanderdecken stood firm as several men dragged the carpenter's creation across the deck and placed it near the rail. Fisher reached the deck and went closer. Von Rundstad howled as though he were being murdered. Men grasped him by the arms and dragged him toward the cage. They forced him into the wide hole at the top. He grasped the bars and started to shake the cage like a gorilla, shouting and sobbing at the same time. The carpenter nailed the slats down firmly.

The men lifted the cage to their shoulders and carried it to the rail. They attached a heavy rope to the top and tied the other end firmly to the rail. With only the voice of the mate to disturb the silence, the basket was tossed over the side.

The rope went taut, held and the basket bumped loudly against the side of the *Oriental*, and it hung motionless just above the waterline. Fisher felt warm and cold at once. Perspiration stood out on his face and the palms of his hands. He clenched his fists tightly, trying to remain calm and undisturbed at what had happened. They were going to leave the poor devil hanging there in the sun until he rotted and died.

As much as he hated von Rundstad, Fisher remembered that the mate could have murdered Vanderdecken long ago, yet had let him live. Fisher didn't know that the men feared Vanderdecken so much that they refused to let him die. He could think only of

the man in the basket, swinging to and fro in the wind until hunger and heat drove him stark, raving mad.

He walked quickly toward the captain. Vanderdecken and Wedge were talking quietly. The men were once more back at their posts.

"Good lord, Captain," Fisher blurted. "You can't—I mean, how can you do this, even to an animal?"

Wedge looked at him queerly.

"Get hold of yourself, Bob," he advised. "The captain has to maintain discipline among the men. He can't chance another mutiny because he fails to punish the leader of this one."

Fisher was sick of the whole thing. He had never expected Jim Wedge to side against him at a time like this. He turned to the captain.

"Then you intend to—to let him die down there?"

Vanderdecken's eyes were cold as ice.

"There is one thing you must understand," he said without visible emotion. "The basket is cruel but mutiny calls for harsh measures. When Von Rundstad has enough, he can escape. We supplied him with a knife."

Wedge chuckled.

"If he needs rest, Bob, he can always cut the rope."

Something in Fisher's brain snapped like a tightly wound watch.

"You're a damned fool," he said fiercely. "You're turning into a heartless, miserable pirate like the rest of them."

He turned and went blindly across the deck to the stairs.

CHAPTER X

The Dey's Bargain

ROBERT FISHER slept little during the next ten days. Wedge moved to one of the smaller cabins and left

him alone. Jim Wedge had tried to be friendly, but after their quarrel, Fisher preferred being left to himself.

Fisher roamed the deck by day and most of the night. His eyes held a fanatical gleam of hatred for everyone around him. Twice he attempted to cut the rope that held Von Rundstad's basket above the water. Both times he was hurled back by Vanderdecken's men and left cursing on the deck. The last time he had gone to his cabin, crying out for Vanderdecken to have mercy on a dying man.

Hendrik von Rundstad was slowly going mad. He shouted and pleaded for his life until he was too hoarse to speak above a whisper. Then he crept around the swaying cage, his shaggy head weaving from side to side, skinny hands clutching the bars. The men themselves, troubled by Fisher's attitude and watching the mate refuse to die in his cage, tried to get Vanderdecken to change his mind. The Dutchman remained unmoved by their pleas. He and Wedge were spending more and more time together, walking the deck alone.

On the tenth day Fisher awakened from his nightmare to hear the steady bump-bump of the basket as it swayed against the ship. He went to the deck, thanking a merciful God that the day was cloudy and the sea calm. Hurrying to the rail, he stared down at Von Rundstad. The mate lay motionless. Perhaps he was still asleep. One claw-like, bony hand protruded from the open bars of the cage.

Fisher took a cautious look about. He was alone on this section of the deck. Drawing a pocket knife, he stole forward to where the rope at the rail supported the cage below. With a quick motion he slashed the rope and sent the mate's makeshift coffin plunging into the sea. He left the rail and went

down to his cabin. As he slammed the door behind him, the high thin voice of the watch came from the crow's nest:

"Tunis—dead ahead!"

Fisher sank face down on the bunk. He heard footsteps on the deck and Captain Vanderdecken giving orders.

"Give her a full head of canves. We'll make port by noon. All hands into the shrouds."

"Tunis or Hell," Fisher thought bitterly. "Let the bloody murderers sail where they want to. We'll all die when the time comes."

The picture of Hendrix von Rundstad's insane eyes had burned an unforgettable picture of horror into his tired brain.

JIM WEDGE had no intention of missing any part of new developments. He was at the wheel, staring through the glass at the white, flat-topped houses and the colorful galleys along the far shore.

"A beautiful sight from a distance," a voice said from behind him.

Wedge nodded without looking away from the city ahead of them. Captain Vanderdecken waited until he turned away from the view. The captain's face was grim.

"You see Gouletta from here," he said. "Tunis is inland. We reach it by small boats through the canals."

"We stop at Tunis?" Wedge asked.

"Tunis," Vanderdecken said quietly, "is our goal."

Goal? Then, perhaps, they would know what fate held in store for them. The *Oriental* was already close in. A Moorish galley swept past them toward Gouletta. The high banks of oars moved in swift precision. Blackmoors were visible, scurrying along the deck of the strange craft. Wedge turned once more toward the glittering, walled city ahead of them.

"I must warn you that from now on you must never interfere with my actions," the captain said. "Christian ships are not welcome here. The Dey is king of the cutthroats. He rules Tunis with an iron hand and demands a share of booty from all who use this port. English Free Rovers use Tunis for refitting their ships and selling their riches. In turn, the Dey demands steady toll from them. If we were to meet one of these galleys at sea, they would not hesitate to sink us and kill every man on board."

Without looking around, Wedge asked casually:

"Will it be possible for you to tell us what is to become of Fisher and myself? The kid's pretty upset. It wasn't that he had any love for the mate. He thinks we're all against him and it's driving him half crazy."

Vanderdecken nodded.

"I know," he said. "I had hoped that such things would affect him strongly. I'm afraid he will have another shock before the day is over."

"Damn you, Vanderdecken," Wedge exclaimed good-naturedly. "Sometimes I get the feeling that you know every act of this play we're in. I wish you'd take me into your confidence."

The captain stared at Wedge's tall figure a little wistfully.

"You are a clever man," he said. "I think also, a tolerant one. Perhaps through you, more than anyone else, my voyage will end successfully."

"You flatter me," Jim Wedge said. "I'd feel a damn sight better if I knew what was coming next."

The *Oriental* sailed quietly into the blue waters of the bay. The sails were furled and the anchor slipped into the water to halt her slow progress. There were several galleys anchored close to them and an African slave-ship near one of the docks. Black men and women

were chanting sadly as they trudged slowly up the plank and into the hold of the slaver.

A small bright barge swept away from the shore and cut the water toward the *Oriental*. Wedge could hear the fat, turbaned official giving loud orders from the bow. The barge came alongside the *Oriental* and the blackmoors rested on their oars. Two of them lifted a long, tightly bound bundle between them and climbed over the rail. The bandy-legged official followed, grunting as he reached the rail and jumped wearily to the deck. Vanderdecken met him.

The official offered a pudgy brown hand and the Dutchman ignored it coolly. The blackmoors dropped the bundle at the captain's feet and stood like two grinning black apes with their ham-like paws on long, curved blades.

Near the docks the steady throbbing of drums started and unfamiliar instruments screamed wild, discordant music that swelled above the war drums.

"We have come on the mission that the *Red Widow* could not perform," Vanderdecken said quickly. "The great captain of the *Red Widow* asks you to accept our riches and send the hostages aboard at once."

IT WAS obvious to Wedge that the war music and the grinning complacency of the official were troubling the Dutch captain. The faces of the blackmoors were equally unpleasant. The turbaned Moor allowed an ugly grin to pass over his face.

"We could not bring all the hostages with us," he said. "You were to arrive here on the thirtieth day of the third month. You are late. The Dey would not wait for you."

He pointed a dirty finger at the bundle on the deck. Vanderdecken's lips trembled strangely.

"You—you have not . . ."

The Moor leaned over and ripped a portion of the bundle open with his dagger. Wedge leaned forward and his face turned an ugly gray. Vanderdecken's breath sucked in loudly.

The face of a dead man stared up at them from the partly opened bundle. Vanderdecken sank to his knees, drawing the shroud down to expose more of the body. The Moor backed away and the blackmoors drew their weapons.

"The Dey bargains only once," the Moor said harshly. "You did not keep your promise."

He scrambled over the rail quickly. The drums were pounding loudly along the shore. Two galleys started to close in on the *Oriental*. Vanderdecken sprang to his feet.

"Up anchor!" he shouted. "Clap on all the canvas we have. Move, you dogs, or we'll all rot in Tunis!"

The anchor rattled out of the water. Men sprang into the shrouds. Wedge, standing above the body on the deck, knew nothing of what went on. He was aware of Bob Fisher, as the New Yorker's shadow fell across the body of the dead man.

The corpse, stiff and blood-soaked, was a duplicate of that of Robert Fisher.

It could have been his twin. A knife had slashed the neck from ear to ear.

Fisher, as he stared down at the corpse, straightened like a marble statue and the blood drained from his face.

CHAPTER XI

Knife for Your Gullet

JIM WEDGE covered the body quickly, but he was too late. Fisher dropped to his knees, drew the shroud

away again and stared into the wide, lifeless eyes. His breath came audibly and his eyes as they turned upward to Wedge's were wild and blood-red. He held a finger to his own neck, tracing the path of the knife.

"My God, Jim," he whimpered pitifully. "It's me!"

He stood up. His hands were clenched tightly as he stared at the lifeless figure.

"You'd better go below," Wedge said. His voice was harsh. "There's nothing you can do here. Whoever the man is, he can do you no harm."

Fisher took a threatening step toward him.

"Damn you, Wedge!" he shouted. "For a month you've been ordering me around. Now I see myself lying there with a knife slash in my throat and it doesn't worry you at all."

His voice rose to a shrill scream.

"You can't hide from me any longer, Wedge. You're a pirate like the rest of them. I'll kill . . ."

Wedge clutched his shoulder and pushed him toward the hatch.

"Shut up, Bob," he said coldly. "You don't know what you're saying."

Fisher wrenched loose.

"I'll go," he said, almost whispering. "But look out for me, Wedge. I'm going to get all of you before I'm through."

Wedge looked tired.

"Go to bed, Bob," he said. "If I could have chosen a companion for this voyage, I wouldn't have taken a sniveling fool."

He stood alone, watching Fisher go below deck. Then, without emotion, he picked up the corpse and tossed it over the side.

"Perhaps," he thought, "things affect me differently than they do Fisher. The boy's all right but he can't stand this life. There must be a solu-

tion to all this, but with a crazy man on my hands, it's going to be harder than ever to find it."

THE *Oriental* slipped from the Bay of Tunis with the help of a strong wind. The Dey's galleys were in hot pursuit but once on the broad waters of the inland sea, they were no match for the swift little Dutch galiot. Then came the long, restless repetition of the first voyage all over again. The decks were badly weathered, sails needed repair and the masts needed refitting. Barnacles were clinging to the hull from the long stay at sea.

Jim Wedge found himself more and more alone. Fisher was beyond reason now. West of La Coruna, Spain, one of Philip's galleys challenged them to battle and managed to send a shot over the *Oriental's* bow. Vanderdecken was no longer wasting time. The *Oriental* kicked up her heels and made a run for it, leaving the Dons to curse in her wake.

Vanderdecken spent long hours on the quarter deck, searching the horizon with his glass. Wedge, waiting for the next phase that he was sure would come, wandered for hours about the deck remembering the pleasant life of New Orleans and wished more and more that he had never quarreled with Dave Laird. From Vanderdecken he learned that the Dey had murdered sixty men, women and children—all English—because the *Oriental* had not arrived on the proper date. This was all the information the Dutch captain would offer and it left Wedge in the dark as much as before. Who the corpse had been, he could not guess; but the strange resemblance between it and Bob Fisher drove him almost mad.

Wedge kept his own calendar carved on the wall of his cabin. He figured roughly that a month and eight days

had passed since that foggy night in New Orleans. On the eighth day out of Tunis, while working with his calendar, he was suddenly startled by the stealthy scrape of boots inside the cabin door.

He looked up quickly, to find Fisher moving toward him like a stealthy cat, cutlass held point forward in his hand. Fisher's face was white as a sheet and a wild light of hatred shown from his narrowed eyes. Wedge realized that his own weapon was on the far side of the room. Fisher came toward him slowly, cutlass raised.

"Bob—wait!" Wedge cried. He tried to jump aside but the cutlass came down in a wicked arc, hitting him on the shoulder. He felt it rip his flesh like white-hot metal. Bright sparks flashed in his brain and he plunged forward into darkness.

WHEN Wedge regained consciousness he was alone in the cabin. His shoulder ached badly. Placing a hand on it, he realized it had been bandaged. He stared at the ceiling, trying to collect his thoughts. The kid must have gone raving crazy to attack him like that. Wedge wondered why he wasn't dead.

He heard footsteps outside, saw Vanderdecken come in and closed his eyes tightly as the captain came toward him.

"Are you awake?" he asked quietly.

Wedge nodded. He didn't feel like talking.

"Fisher is in chains below," Vanderdecken said. "I had been watching him closely. I'm sorry I did not arrive in time to save you the wound."

Wedge sat up, painfully leaning on his good arm.

"Thanks," he said. "I guess the kid saw too much in Tunis. It's sent him out of his head."

Vanderdecken seemed to want to open a conversation, and didn't know just how to go about it.

"I'm sorry," he muttered at last, "that I caused hatred between you and your friend."

Wedge's lips tightened.

"Forget it," he advised. "I guess you know what you're doing. I don't hate Fisher. What he saw at Tunis was enough to unnerve any man."

Vanderdecken smiled slightly.

"I wish I could tell you what is in my mind." He turned to the rough marks Wedge had been carving on the wall. "I see you have marked the tenth day of the fourth month on your calendar."

"It helps pass the time," Wedge said. "I'd be damned grateful for another chance at my own way of living. I'm not cut out for this pirate stuff."

"I think," Vanderdecken went on, "that on the eleventh day of this month, many things will be explained. I hope you will stand by your friend, although I think it wise that he remain in chains long enough for him to realize what he has done."

Wedge stared upward toward the small porthole. Another riddle.

"I hope that I don't have to stand a test as gruesome as Fisher's," he said. "I might be little less than a madman myself."

Vanderdecken shuddered.

"Fisher meant to slash your gullet as he saw that other poor devil slashed. I thank God that I was able to prevent it. All my work will have been in vain if either of you dies."

CHAPTER XII

Revenge of the Red Widow

THE cry from the mast was high-pitched and exultant.

"Sail ho! To starboard! She looks like the *Red Widow*."

A thrill of excitement flashed through Wedge's body. The *Red Widow*? He had heard the name before, from Vanderdecken's lips. There was something about it that was challenging. It brought him from his bunk quickly and, with his arm in a sling, he hurried to the dock. The morning was fairly calm but a west wind chopped white caps on the surface of the sea and sent the *Oriental* heeling far over on her course northward.

Vanderdecken and his crew were all on deck, watching the ship that sailed toward them. Far to the north and slightly out of line with them, a high-masted vessel bore down upon the galiot. As she grew out of the sea, Wedge saw the brightly colored sails and the shining woodwork that flashed in the sun. Her lines were smooth and built for speed, and a line of cannon pushed ugly muzzles from her sides.

Wedge watched the Dutch captain for some sign of what would happen. He was aware that Fisher had been released and was coming along the deck toward him. Fisher's face was dirty and tired. His hair had grown long, merging into a dirty, black beard. Sulenly he ignored Wedge and went to the rail.

Vanderdecken issued orders swiftly and the *Oriental* came about, the crew furling her sails. Then followed a half hour of waiting as the *Red Widow* came in close, furled her own sails and launched a long-boat.

Wedge saw several seamen climb down her side and a tall, handsomely dressed man swung over the rail and followed. He couldn't take his eyes from the man as the boat cut the waves between the two vessels.

The long-boat came abreast of the *Oriental* and the slim, sinewy figure of

the *Red Widow's* captain swung aboard. He ignored Vanderdecken's offer of assistance and jumped lightly to the deck.

Wedge stood transfixed, staring with puzzled eyes at the newcomer. Before him, dressed in the gaudy, expensive trappings of an English Sea Rover, was the perfect image of himself.

Fisher saw the resemblance also. He turned toward Wedge, a question in his eyes. Then he walked toward him quickly.

"It's you, Jim!"

Wedge couldn't speak. His lips and tongue were dry. Perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

Fisher stood his ground.

"Perhaps you know now how I felt in Tunis," he said in a hushed voice.

Wedge's eyes were on the man who faced Vanderdecken.

It was Captain John Wedge of the ship *Red Widow* who spoke.

"Captain Hans Vanderdecken. It seems you couldn't escape us, for all your blundering about the sea."

Vanderdecken's face expressed only sorrow.

"But Captain Wedge," he protested. "I've been searching for you these many weeks. I had no wish to escape the *Red Widow*."

Captain Wedge, Jim Wedge thought. Vanderdecken was addressing the stranger by *his* name. His scalp prickled strangely. The tall sea captain strode up and down the deck as though trying to control his temper. He returned to Vanderdecken.

"Captain, you were once an honest man. I trusted you on a mission that meant life to sixty of my closest friends. You carried a fortune so vast that it turned your head. You failed that mission and now I'm going to punish you as

I would singe the mangy beard of a Spanish Don."

"First you will hear my story?" Vanderdecken's voice was hardly more than a whisper.

Captain John Wedge drew a scroll of parchment from his pocket and thrust it toward the captain of the *Oriental*.

"This message came overland from Tunis," he said sternly. "Johnathan Fisher's son escaped the Dey. Read it and profit by the knowledge of what you have done."

Vanderdecken took the scroll, unrolled it and read hurriedly. He looked up at last to meet the full fury of John Wedge's eyes.

"This is a great injustice," he protested in a broken voice. "We arrived outside Tunis only a day late. There was no point in leaving the silver, with the terrible deed already done. I tried to return hastily and report my failure to you."

John Wedge waved his arm, dismissing Vanderdecken's words in a fit of temper. Their conversation was in low, tense tones that the two Americans could not understand. Jim Wedge's mind was in a turmoil. He sought some explanation, but none presented itself.

"Enough," Captain Wedge of the *Red Widow* said at last. "You find no forgiveness in my heart. You say the silver is still in your hold?"

WEDGE turned and went hurriedly toward Vanderdecken's cabin. He could stand no more. Fisher followed him. Wedge slumped down on the captain's bunk, his head in his hands. Fisher put his hand on Wedge's shoulder.

"I'm sorry about what happened, Jim," he said brokenly. "Now you know how I felt. It didn't make sense and I guess the shock was too much.

I see now that I was a fool to quarrel with you."

Fisher looked at him silently for a minute then held out his hand.

"It's okay, Bob," he said. "Tell me when that—that ghost leaves, will you?"

Fisher went to the window and looked out. The *Oriental* was rocking gently on the waves. The tall-masted ship was still there, a bare five hundred yards away.

"I think they're going to tie up to us," Fisher said. "Maybe they're after that silver."

Wedge looked up.

"None of it makes sense to you yet?" he asked.

"None of it," Fisher agreed.

"Then be sure of this much," Wedge said. "We weren't looking at ourselves. The dead man in Tunis and the one out there on deck are both from somewhere in our past. Vanderdecken brought us back to see them for a reason only he can guess. I only know that through someone's intolerance and bull-headedness, a lot of trouble occurred that could have been avoided. The Dutchman wanted us to see that."

The ship lurched suddenly and the sound of wood grating against wood came from the side of the vessel.

"They're grappling the two ships together," Fisher said from his post by the window. "I think I guessed right about the silver."

They remained quietly in the cabin throughout the afternoon. Neither Vanderdecken nor Wedge came on deck again. Men worked hurriedly, carrying the silver bars from the *Oriental* to the deck of the *Red Widow*. It was close to sunset when Fisher, dozing from the heat of the cabin, started upright. Captain John Wedge's voice roared from the silence of the *Red Widow's* deck.

"Order your crew to cast off. Put on

a full head of canvas and stand away."

Jim Wedge didn't rise from the bunk.

"She's pulling away," Fisher said excitedly. "Vanderdecken acts as though he's all worn out. The crew's into the shrouds."

The captain came across the deck and opened the door to the cabin. His face was stony gray and his voice cracked with emotion.

"Prepare to abandon this ship," he told them.

Wedge rose quickly.

"You mean that damned pirate is going to send us to the bottom?"

Vanderdecken nodded.

"He has refused to believe that my story of our attempt to reach Tunis was the truth. You saw the trouble we had with the mate. You know that the *Donna Marie* and the mutiny kept us from reaching our goal in time. Captain John Wedge will have none of it. He will punish us for our failure to arrive at Tunis in time to ransom those prisoners."

Wedge's face was red with anger.

"We'll fight back. We'll blow his ship out of the water as we did the *Donna Marie*."

Vanderdecken shook his head.

"You are again attempting to quarrel with Fate." The captain turned toward the door. "We cannot hope to win against the *Red Widow*. I cannot match the *Oriental* against a crack Sea Rover who has command of three hundred men and a vessel bristling with cannon."

B-a-r-o-o-m-!

THE sound of a cannon roared from the direction of the *Red Widow*. It must have made a direct hit. Wedge felt the ship heel over and turn about swiftly. They ran to the deck. Seamen were rushing toward the bow. The fore-mast shuddered under the

blow and crumpled downward into the water. Jim Wedge rushed to the rail, shaking his fist toward the *Red Widow* like a wild man.

"You stinking, bloody pirates!" His voice was a cry of hate. "I'd like to . . ."

B-a-r-o-o-m-!

"Get down, man," Vanderdecken shouted. "It's a broadside."

He fell face down on the deck. Wedge stood erect as the side of the *Red Widow* belched black smoke. The *Oriental* shook from stern to bow and plunged downward into the water. The main-mast cracked like thunder, broke half way up and pitched to the deck. Billowing clouds of canvas fell over the crew and below deck flames started to crackle and roar near the powder room.

"The boat!" Fisher cried. "We've got to get out of here."

He started after Vanderdecken, saw that Wedge was still at the rail swearing at the *Red Widow*, and went back to him. He took his arm firmly and sought to draw him away from the rail.

"It's no use, Jim," he said. "We'll sink in a few minutes. Better make the best of it."

Wedge allowed himself to be led toward the boat. Vanderdecken, already at the oars, was waiting for them as they went over the side. It was almost dark. Wedge sank into the bottom of the boat, his eyes glazed with anger.

He could remember only that night in New Orleans when he had sworn at Dave Laird and accused him of being a thief. Men did foolish, terrible things when they were angry.

The *Red Widow* had stopped firing. The *Oriental* dipped nose first into the sea and sank quickly. Fisher, once more in control of his senses, stared

at the pitiful figure of the Dutchman.

"The *Red Widow* has had her revenge, Captain," he said slowly. "Why we were brought here, I don't know, but if our hatred for the *Red Widow's* captain makes you feel any better, I think we all three have something in common."

CHAPTER XIII

Ship of Evil Tidings

THE Dutch captain stopped rowing.

It was quite dark now, and fog settled down, blotting out everything near them. His eyes were kindly as he watched the two men before him. He sat thus for a long time, as though collecting his exhausted wits.

"Many things I am sure you already know," he said. "I will tell the rest as quickly as possible. In 1648, Captain John Wedge of the *Red Widow* had his ship and himself tightly sewn up in a small English harbor. His Majesty's ship, *Sovereign of the Seas*, had Wedge where he could move not an inch from his anchorage without being blown from the water. John Wedge had a garrison of men with their wives and children living under the Dey's protection in Tunis. This garrison was controlled by John Wedge's business manager, Johnathan Fisher."

"Fisher?" Bob Fisher interrupted. "The dead man we saw in Tunis? The one with the slit throat?"

Vanderdecken nodded and went on hurriedly.

"Johnathan Fisher held control of headquarters for Wedge in Tunis. Wedge was a Free Rover, plundering Spanish ships and selling his riches to the Dey. At last their money dwindled and there was no protection money left to be paid to the Dey. A message went to Wedge across the Mediter-

anean, and by dispatch overland, demanding silver before the last day of the third month."

The captain paused, moistening his lips.

"Wedge got the silver right enough but could not get away to deliver it himself. I had the *Oriental* in the same harbor for repairs. Dutch ships were free to come and go as they pleased. John Wedge offered me much gold and protection for as long as I sailed, if in turn I would smuggle the silver beneath the noses of the King's ship and deliver it in time to save his garrison from being wiped out.

"You know the rest of the story. We fought every ill-fortune man has ever faced. We arrived one day after every man, woman and child was murdered, and Johnathan Fisher's body was delivered to us on deck of the *Oriental*."

"And Johnathan Fisher," Fisher said slowly, "was some early ancestor of mine."

Vanderdecken smiled.

"In the Seventeenth century, Johnathan Fisher's son escaped from Tunis and lived to become your ancestor."

"I suppose I'm descended from that dirty pirate we just escaped from," Jim Wedge said abruptly.

"Such is the case," Vanderdecken said. "In you, however, I have found understanding, while in your ancestor I found only hate."

"But what about you?" Bob Fisher asked eagerly. "Surely you're no ghost from the past."

"I've taken you back to the year of 1648," the Dutchman said. "Johnathan Fisher, in the letter he sent by his son, cursed the vessel and the man who failed to deliver the silver in time to save his life. Wedge could have lifted that curse but he chose to be stubborn, punish us for a thing we could not prevent. I and my ship were to sail the

seven seas until the end of time. I had but one chance for salvation. The *Oriental* sailed on and on through the years always living and reliving that first terrible voyage. Men grew to hate the sight of our ship and it was considered ill-luck to look upon us as we passed at sea. The fog and the storms battered the hulk of our vessel until we grew to represent bad weather and all things that men of the sea hate bitterly. If I could find the men who had in them the same blood as my accusers, and make them understand that my trial had not been fair, I could escape the curse that was on my shoulders. I searched until I found the only men alive who had the same blood as Johnathan Fisher and Captain John Wedge in their veins. You were those men."

A SIGH escaped Jim Wedge's lips.

"It's all so damned wild and unbelievable, and yet I can understand something of what you felt. If I can in any way speak for my ancestor, John Wedge, I'll say that he was a fool if one ever lived."

"Perhaps," Vanderdecken said, "the events of these weeks have furnished a valuable lesson to both of you."

Wedge looked at Fisher.

"I guess he's right," he said. "I'd have some apologies to make if I could reach New Orleans."

Fisher's thoughts went back swiftly to a girl who had faced him with pain in her eyes that day on the Jersey Ferry. He nodded in agreement.

The fog was hugging the water and Vanderdecken was hardly visible in the far end of the boat. He looked suddenly older and more at peace with the world than they had ever noticed before.

"You have lifted the curse that burdened my heart," he said in a faint voice. "Give this message to men who sail the seas. The *Oriental* will no

longer appear from the fog before a storm to strike terror to their hearts."

Fisher opened his mouth as though to speak but Wedge stopped him by questioning the Dutchman hurriedly.

"But, sir, I've never heard of the *Oriental* before we came aboard her. Surely she hasn't been the terrible ship you seem to think."

Vanderdecken's voice, barely a whisper, wafted to them from the blackness of the night.

"*She is known to men of the sea as the ghost ship Flying Dutchman!*"

Fisher's eyes widened. He stared at Wedge and together they turned toward the end of the boat.

"*The Flying Dutchman?*" Wedge's voice held startled horror. "Good Lord, then we've been . . ."

He stopped short. The boat no longer held Hans Vanderdecken. He had faded into the night, a ghost of the past, for the first time finding peace in a watery grave.

Before their eyes the boat turned rotten and mouldy. The oars fell to pieces as they watched. The wood was dry, crumbling away like tinder.

"Quick!" Wedge shouted hoarsely. "She's going down!"

The boat dissolved before they could jump from it and both men were left struggling in the water.

"I—can't—swim," Wedge gasped, and started to sink. Fisher flailed the water and managed to grasp Wedge about the neck. He treaded water desperately, hoping for rescue that must be out of question.

He thought he heard a shrill horn sounding in the fog. A light focused upon them and Fisher felt a solid, tire-shaped life-preserver strike his shoulder and bounce off. He grasped it tightly with his free arm.

"Hold on, there," a loud voice called. "We'll be alongside in a jiffy."

Fisher felt he must be going daft. He imagined he heard the throbbing, powerful motors of a launch coming toward them. He saw the low hull of the boat as it idled alongside. Then arms were about his waist, drawing him from the water. Immense relief filled his heart and he fainted.

CHAPTER XIV

Return to Reality

BOB FISHER sat up weakly, looking across the tiny cabin of the Coast Guard cutter at the thick-set, grinning captain. Wedge was already awake, and smiling at him from the folds of an overcoat twice his girth.

"Glad you came around," the captain said in a cheerful voice. "We figure you've both been adrift for some time. The cook is bringing in some soup."

Fisher nodded and stared at Wedge. What explanation could they make? How could they, even to themselves, justify all this? The cook came in with steaming bowls of soup and fresh white bread. Wedge ate eagerly, while he stared at the details of the cabin as though eager to make sure everything was real.

"I'm puzzled about what happened to your raft," the captain said suddenly. "Of course there was a heavy fog when we heard you calling for help. Still, I thought we would have no trouble in picking it up."

Wedge said quietly, "I suppose this is regular routine work for you?"

The other chuckled.

"Twenty miles off Sandy Hook with a war going on. There are plenty of customers for us these days."

Fisher stared at a small calendar tacked on the far wall. The top leaf showed the month of April, 1943.

"What is the exact date, anyway?" he asked.

Wedge shot him a warning glance, but the captain looked concerned.

"Say," he said, "I'd forgotten you chaps may have been drifting alone out there for God knows how long. This is the twelfth of April. How long since your ship went down?"

Fisher, without thinking, began: "April of the year sixteen—"

Wedge broke in hurriedly.

"Quite a while, Captain," he said. There was a quizzical gleam in his eye. "I can't remember the exact date, but I'll hazard a guess that we've set some kind of a record for being adrift in an open boat."

THE MUSKETEERS IN PARIS

(Concluded from page 119)

to one side as Phillip gunned the car and roared through the open gate and onto the dark road.

"Turn left," Marie said suddenly. "We cannot go back to Paris. The route to Switzerland is to the left. In Switzerland we will all be safe. I have connections along the route that will assure us a safe trip."

Phillip swung the car to the left and drove swiftly down the dark road, away from Paris.

They drove in silence for several minutes, but there was an uneasy tension in the car that was almost physically tangible.

D'Artagnan said suddenly, "Stop the car, little Phillip."

"Why?" Marie cried.

Phillip brought the car to a quiet stop. The night was black and by the faint light of the stars they could make out the rugged landscape of the French countryside.

D'Artagnan stepped from the car.

"There is work to be done in France," he said quietly. "I cannot leave. The rest of you take the good scientists on to Switzerland. I will remain here."

Porthos, Aramis and Athos clam-

bered from the car.

"A shabby trick, D'Artagnan," Porthos grumbled. "You would have the fun of sticking Nazis and leave us to twiddle our thumbs with women and children."

Phillip had slipped quietly from the car and was standing beside the musketeers on the dark road.

"I will stay with you," he said simply.

Marie looked at them for an instant, and her eyes were wet as they met D'Artagnan's, but she said nothing.

"Your minds are made up," she said softly. "May God bless you all and may we meet again."

She touched D'Artagnan lightly on the cheek with her hand and then slipped to the driver's seat.

"*Au revoir*, my friends," she murmured.

The musketeers bowed slightly, and Phillip had to blink his eyes rapidly to keep back the tears.

The car moved away and the four men watched until its red tail-light disappeared in the blackness of the night. Then they turned and started walking back along the road to Paris, arm-in-arm, smiling into the darkness.

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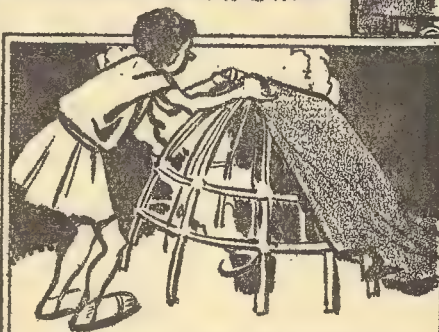
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ROMANCE OF THE ELEMENTS—



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SULPHUR

By GORDON McLEAN & ROD RUTH

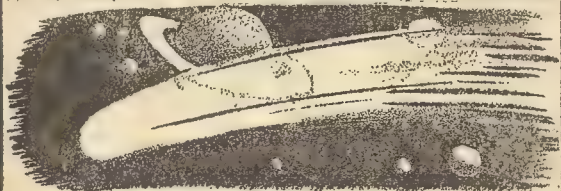



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SULPHUR is number 16 in the International Table of Atomic Weights. Its symbol is S, and its atomic weight is 32.064. Sulphur occurs in two forms: Rhombic Sulphur, which is a large yellow crystal having a specific gravity of 2.06, a melting point of 113° and a boiling point of 445°; Monoclinic Sulphur, occurring in long, thin crystals having a specific gravity of 1.96 and a melting point of 119°. Plastic sulphur, a viscous, elastic, transparent mass, is formed by pouring melted sulphur into water. This is its commercial form. (NEXT ISSUE: The Romance of Lithium)

LEFTY FEEP'S ARABIAN NIGHTMARE

By
**ROBERT
BLOCH**

Ali Ben Alikat had eight snakes
and a mission in life. Since he was
not able to handle both at the same
time, Lefty Feep got the reptiles!



MEOW!" yelled Lefty Feep.
"Take it away!"

I stared up at the tall, thin racketeer *raconteur* as he stood trembling before my table in Jack's Shack.

"Grab loose," pleaded Feep. "Remove it out of here."

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Why are you so upset when you see me eating spaghetti?"

"Spaghetti?" Feep breathed a sigh of relief. "I am nearly beating it when I see you eating it."

"Why should spaghetti affect you?" I asked, as Feep sat down at the table beside me. "Doesn't it agree with you?"

"It is not a question of my digestion," said Lefty Feep. "I take one look at the spaghetti and I think I am seeing snakes."

"Snakes?"

"Snakes give me the shakes," Feep muttered. "I am not in hep style over a reptile."

"Don't like snakes, eh?"

"A boa constrictor is not a pretty picture, and I am not much fonder of an anaconda."

I shook my head. "I don't understand this, Lefty. Have you been drinking and seeing snakes—is that it?"

Feep nodded slowly.

I make with the snakes and the frails begin to quail



"When I'm drinking, from snakes I'm shrinking," he admitted.

I smiled. "Then if I were you, I'd stop drinking. If you stop drinking you won't see any more snakes."

Feep frowned. "But I do stop and I still see snakes," he told me. "I see serpents in the present tense."

A peculiar gleam came into Lefty Feep's eyes. I recognized it only too well. Lefty Feep had another story. When Feep gets a gleam in his eyes, I generally get a pain in my ears. This time I decided to make my escape in a hurry. I rose from the table.

"I must be going," I remarked.

"Exactly," said Mr. Feep, pushing me back in my chair. "You are going to hear my story."

"But—"

"I must tell you this," said Feep. "I have a snake tale."

"Sorry," I murmured. "I am not interested in your peculiar anatomy."

"Allow me to twist this tale for you," said Lefty Feep. He held me very firmly in place.

I sighed. There was nothing else to do but sit there while Feep began to wail his tale.

"It all starts," said Lefty Feep—

IT ALL starts the other day.

I am feeling down in the dumps the other day, which is not surprising, because I am down in a dump—a place called the Oasis.

The Oasis is a little tavern located in a desert of clip joints. It has a sort of oriental atmosphere—because it is never aired out.

Part of the desert charm lies in the fact that it is usually deserted. Then, of course, there is the sand and the palms.

The sand is in the cuspidors, and the palms belong to the waiters, who are always holding them out for a tip.

The owner of the Oasis is an oriental character generally known as the Sneak of Araby.

I do not know why I mention all this, because I am not particularly interested in the atmosphere of this joint. I am in here trying to drown my sorrows—only from the rate at which I inhale, I am more likely to drown myself. The more I spin the bottle, the soberer I get.

Do not get the wrong impression. I am not a drinking man. I seldom drink any more—any more than I can get. But there is a reason.

To speak rankly and frankly, I am in love with a dove—but she flies too high for me. The ginch in question is a burlesque cutie; a beauty but very snooty. Her name is Fanny, and for a while she and I are closer than Siamese twins.

But a few days ago she comes and tells me that she is going to abandon her art and try for a job in a classical ballet. She is getting persnickety about terpsichore, and sure enough, she lands a spot in the rehearsals of a ballet troupe.

Right away she starts putting on the dog about going from Minsky to Nijinsky in one easy lesson, and I can see that she is giving me the colder shoulder.

I question her and find out she has a new flame—none other than the personality who is backing the ballet. He is Herman Sherman, an overgrown hunk of vermin.

I do not like Herman Sherman, or classical dancing, or her attitude. But instead of punching Herman Sherman in the nose and spoiling Fanny's chances, I walk out of her life like a gentleman. I am really gone on the damsel, and so I bow out gracefully and head for this Oasis tavern like I say. And there I stand all alone at the bar

in the afternoon, trying to drown my sorrows.

I am just going down for the third time when I happen to notice this whisker standing next to me at the bar.

He comes in very quietly, because I do not hear him approach at all. The first thing that attracts my attention is when I reach for a glass and get a handful of beard instead.

I put the beard back on the bar, not being a beard-drinker, and stare at the face attached to it. It is a dark brown face, hiding in back of a big nose. It is not exactly the kind of a face you find on bar-room floors, so I examine the owner more carefully.

He is dressed in a long white night gown and has a towel wrapped around his head. Unless he is a fugitive from a Turkish bath, I cannot place him.

Then I notice he carries a big, long wicker basket. And I think I figure things out.

He must be the Oasis version of a cigarette girl. I know there is a shortage of help these days—they can't get cigarette girls because they are all working as welders.

THE whisker smiles at me, but I pay no attention you can mention to this clown in the nightgown, because I am too busy drinking. In fact, I am getting wobbly. Almost at the stage where I expect to see snakes.

I do.

Suddenly, on the bar in front of me, I see the snakes gliding along. They are lean, mean, and green.

I mutter and utter a swell yell, then cover my face with my hands. I do not like to see snakes. I wish that they would go away.

But they don't.

When I look again, the snakes are still there.

I cover my eyes once more and brace

myself. It can't be true. I sneak another peek, very meek and weak. And then I shriek.

Because the snakes are more than just wriggling on the bar, now. They are coiled up. Coiled up in front of me. Coiled up, five of them in a line. They twist and turn and then lie still. And I see they are coiled up in a *word*.

Yes, those snakes are lying on the bar, each with its body twisted to spell out a letter. All together, they spell out the word—"S O U S E."

I can't understand it.

And I can't stand it!

Five snakes, spelling out the word, "S O U S E," in front of me on the bar!

One flash and I am ready to dash. I get myself braced to run out of the joint.

At this moment the guy in the night gown suddenly notices the snakes. He just blinks and winks. Then he bends down and whispers to them.

Yes, he whispers through his whiskers at the snakes!

"My little green friends," he croons, "It is very naughty of you to escape once more."

Naughty is no word for it—revolting is my idea. But the whisker is not revolted. He grins at the serpents and then he reaches into his nightie and pulls out a little two-by-four tuba and begins to blow it.

He begins to blow this tuba, and it is lucky for him that there is nobody in the joint and the bartender is sweeping the floor, because he really sets up a squeaking that is reeking.

The tune he plays is certainly an eerie earful, but it is evidently number one on the snakes' Hit Parade, because they suddenly uncoil and wriggle back into the wire basket from which they emerge. The snake that makes the "E" in "SOUSE" almost fractures its pelvis

trying to uncoil again.

I almost fracture my neck staring at this far from delectable spectacle.

The whisker notices my noticing, and when he finally puts the lid back on the basket, he blinks his lids at me with a smile. At least I think there is the sunshine of a smile lurking under the silver lining of his beard.

"Ten thousand apologies, my honored and esteemed sir," he says, in a high voice. "I am humbly sorry if my little friends in any way disturb you. You like my little friends?"

"They are no friends of mine," I tell him. "I do not care to have any friends that crawl around on their bellies and make fun of honest drunks."

"Allah willing, it shall not happen again, I assure you," says the whitey in the nightie.

THEN curiosity gets the better of me. "Am I nuts," I inquire, "or do I see these snakes spell out a word?"

"Your sanity is sublime and beyond question," the dark man assures me. "The serpents do indeed spell out a word."

And he goes ahead talking, introducing himself to me. He is Ali Ben Alikat, an ornamental oriental from Iraq and Mesopotamia. An Arab, in other words. He claims that back in the East he is a sort of priest—only in his country the term is "dervish". He is one of these whirling dervishes, and according to him, he certainly gets around, until Axis gunfire disturbs his sleep one Arabian night.

I ask him why the Axis should bother him, and he bows and tells me.

"It is because of the treasure, of course," he whispers, waggling his beard and looking around to see if we are still alone.

"What treasure?"

"The sceptre," he mutters, from un-

der his beard. "The sceptre of the great Caliph, Haroun Al Raschid."

"Come again?" I invite him.

"Haroun Al Raschid, Caliph of Bagdad," he tells me. "It is a sacred relic, hidden and guarded by dervishes throughout the centuries. If the Axis could but lay hands on it, they would boast of this possession. Legend has it that he who owns the sceptre is a conqueror none can stand before. And my simple countrymen, learning that the Axis has the sceptre, would bow before German agents and give in. As a dervish, it is my sacred duty to guard that sceptre with my worthless life."

He goes on to mention that he flees to this country with the sceptre and also takes the snakes. The sacred snakes.

"Sacred snakes?" I inquire.

"Ah, but yes, *effendi*," he answers.

"Feep is the name," I come back. "But what is this about sacred snakes?"

"Hatched under the Kaaba stone," he whispers. "In the holy of holies. Raised in the mosques by the followers of the Prophet. Full of the wisdom of the serpent."

"Direct descendants of the serpent in the Garden of Eden."

"What good are they?"

"Ah, *effendi*, they constitute what you in the west would call oracles. They can be used in soothsaying. When I play to them the music of the dervishes, they will give warnings and foretell the future by spelling out words," explains this Bagdaddy.

"Wait a minute, now," I object. "That I cannot swallow. I hear a lot about snake-charmers, I admit, but I still think I have hallucinations when I see them spell out a word."

"Behold, then," drones Ali Ben Alikat. "By the beard of the Prophet, observe."

And he whips the cover off the wire

basket. I take a look. Then I wish to take a powder. Eight snakes are coiled there on the side and bottom of the basket.

"By the sacred cuticle of Moham-med," says the dervish, "this is not the work of *djinn* or *efreet*. There is no sorcerous enchantment involved. These are the veritable serpents of wisdom, who foretell the future and act as auguries, diviners, and—"

"Snakes alive," I interrupt. "Kindly close the basket. I don't like the way they look at me."

"They will not harm you," says Ali Ben Alikat. "Wait, and I will introduce you. My little ones, meet Lefty Feep."

"Hello," I gulp, having nothing else to say.

THE snakes writhe into a heap and suddenly they are lying coiled up in the bottom of the basket, spelling out the word, "H E L L O."

Absolutely, that's what they do!

And as the snakes coil, I recoil.

"Why do you carry them around?" I gasp.

"Merely to warn me if the Axis or its agents get on my trail," explains Ali Ben Alikat.

"But you're not a Bagdad lad any more," I reason with him. "You escape, don't you?"

"The Axis has agents everywhere," Alikat sighs. "And they still wish to secure this sceptre. I am going to give it to a museum for safe-keeping, I believe. But I have not made arrangements to turn it over. Consequently it is still in my possession."

"Where is it?" I ask.

"Here," says Ali Ben Alikat. He whips up the corner of his nightie. I bend down and see it strapped to his leg. Sure enough, it is a long golden sceptre, with beautiful designs on it.

"The serpents will warn me and tell

me when to turn this over to authorities in your country," the dervish explains. "They are my spiritual guides. Are you not, my little green brothers?"

He smiles at the snakes in the basket and lowers his nightie again.

Suddenly he frowns. He stares down and points at the snakes with a skinny finger. I look at them. The serpents coil up furiously and I read their message. "LOOK OUT," is what seven of the snakes spell, and the eighth one is just trying to form itself into an exclamation point when—

The lights go out.

So do I, almost. Because I hear a swish and a thud behind my ear. I duck just in time. I hear Ali Ben Alikat screeching in the darkness, and know he is fighting some one or some thing. I turn and grapple with a figure. And when I grapple, I really grap. There is a lot of howling and yelling and cursing, and then the lights go on again and I am standing there with my foot caught in a cuspidor.

Ali Ben Alikat is leaning against the bar, clutching his basket of snakes. His turban is a little unravelled, and he is breathing hard, but he is not hurt. He gives me the old glare and stare.

"Dog of a dog!" he howls. "Pig of a pig! Mule of a mule!"

"Make up your mind," I suggest.

"You are a spy," he accuses. "You put the frame around me, eh?"

"I don't frame you," I object.

"You turn out the lights and let them attack me," he wails. "Then they steal my sceptre."

"Nobody steals a sceptre," I tell him.

"Look," yells Ali Ben Alikat, lifting his skirts. "It is gone from my leg. It is stolen!"

"It is not stolen," I reply. "When the lights go out, I take the sceptre from your leg, yes. And I use it to hit the attackers over the head. That's how I

drive them away. Take a look."

AND I show him the sceptre in my hand. It is not damaged, even though I do use it to work on our mysterious enemies, whoever they are.

"Allah be praised!" gasps the dervish. "You are indeed my preserver, my benefactor. I rub my forehead in the dust to you, oh brave *effendi* Feep."

"Think nothing of it," I say, handing him the golden sceptre, which he stows away once more in his garter.

"This settles it," he sighs. "It proves the Axis is on my trail. Tomorrow I shall go to the museum—there is to be a director's meeting—and I shall turn the sceptre of Haroun Al Raschid over to them in the name of my government."

"Very sensible idea," I agree.

"Until that time," says Ali, "you must keep the snakes."

"Me? But why?"

"Because you are now in danger. This attack proves it. Since you save me and the sceptre, they will be on your trail too. I insist that you keep the snakes to warn you, to protect you from our evil assailants."

He hands me the basket.

"Tomorrow night we will go to the museum together," he says. "Now I shall leave and make arrangements. I am staying at the Ardlore Hotel. Call me there, and I shall be your humble servant in any enterprise you desire. Until then, farewell."

Before I know it, this dervish has me whirling. Half an hour ago I never set my orbs on him in my life. Now I am already mixed up with Axis spies, a golden sceptre, and a nest of snakes. More than that, he is ready to leave me holding the bag.

Or holding the wire basket, rather.

I stand there trying to figure things out, and he slips the tin tuba in my hand.

"When you desire information from the sacred snakee," he says, "then you will blow upon this. Do you know how to blow?"

"Yes," I assure him. "I know how to blow."

So I pick up the tuba and the basket, and while he is bowing and scraping, I blow.

I blow out of the Oasis and wander down the street, hugging the tuba and lugging the basket of snakes under my arm.

I walk down the street, pretty glad that it is a quiet evening by this time, and there is no one to notice me and what I am carrying.

But I do not get very far before I go from glad to bad. I am in fact also sad and mad—because coming down the sidewalk towards me is none other than that fascinating female, Fanny.

Sure enough, my ex-girl friend is waddling and toddling in my direction. It is too dark to see her face, but her wiggle is familiar.

And here I am, stuck with a basketful of snakes! A mess from Mesopotamia!

I HAVE a sneaking hunch that Fanny is not fond of serpents. And I don't dare ditch the sacred snakes. Being a woman, she will ask me what I have in the basket, and I can not think of a quick answer unless I say, "I am taking some food to my Grandma."

This will not do either, since Fanny knows my Grandma and anyone who knows my Grandma will realize that she does not care for any food except gin.

So I am definitely on the spot.

There is only one thing to do and that is to get rid of the basket.

As I see Fanny coming down the block, I duck into a doorway and open the basket. I grab a handful of snakes

and stuff them into my pockets and then throw the basket away.

I do not know if you ever have a pocketful of snakes in your life, but take it from me, you feel very wormy and squirmy.

But I do not mind, because I am really hot to patch things up with Fanny. I step out on the sidewalk and give her a big smile.

She is in a good humor, because she smiles right back.

"Why Lefty Feep, of all people," she giggles. "How are you?"

I take her arm and tell her how I are, and steer her into a conversation, to say nothing of a hot-dog stand on the corner.

"This meeting calls for a celebration," I tell her. "How about a hamburger?"

We sit on a couple of stools and order, and she begins to exert tongue and lung about her ballet dancing.

"The final rehearsal is over," she tells me. "We open tomorrow night. I am dancing in Schtunkowski's ballet, *La Spectre de la Retch*. And guess who the conductor is?"

Me, I do not care who the conductor is, or the motorman either, but I can see she is very excited about her professional debut as a ballet hoofer. So I listen to her and nod my head over the hamburgers.

"You will want to see the performance," she tells me. "Here is a complimentary ticket, Lefty. I get them from Herman Sherman."

I take the ticket, but even though it is a front row seat, my eyes do not pop over it.

My eyes are popping over something else.

When Fanny mentions the name of Herman Sherman, something happens. Two snakes slither out of my pocket and wriggle to the floor. And they coil

themselves into the shape of a swastika.

"Herman Sherman," she says, and the snakes make a swastika on the floor of the hamburger joint.

My eyes pop and my heart starts to hop. But nobody notices the serpents, and in a minute they crawl up the side of the stool and get back into my pocket.

STILL, I am doing a lot of thinking.

These snakes are supposed to warn me. And if they make a swastika—

"Pardón me, honey," I say to Fanny. "But this fellow who is backing the ballet—"

"You mean this impresario?"

"That is not a very nice thing to call a guy," I tell her, "but maybe you are right. What I mean to ask—is this Herman Sherman by any chance a German?"

"Why, yes, I think he is," Fanny tells me. "Why?"

"I don't know," I answer. But I do know. "Herman the German," I mutter, under my breath. I have this hunch. Can it be that Fanny's new boy friend is one of the Axis agents Ali Ben Alikat is afraid of?

"What is the matter with you, Lefty?" asks Fanny. She notices that I am squirming around in my seat. Of course I cannot tell her that the snakes are getting warm in my pocket and doing a little exploring.

"Nothing at all," I tell her. And just to keep her from noticing too much, I slip the little tin tuba out of my coat pocket and wave it around.

"Why Lefty, don't tell me you are a musician," Fanny gurgles.

"All right, I won't tell you," I say.

"I never know you are artistic," says Fanny. "I adore artists, you know. Poor boy, no wonder you are nervous and fidgety. You must have an artistic temperament."

What I really have is snakes in the shorts, but I don't dare mention it. Still, if Fanny likes artists and musicians, then that's my cue.

"I do a little something along that line," I admit.

"Then we are twin souls" Fanny sighs. "Lefty—you must play something for me."

"Not now," I stall. "Not here."

"Why not?" she coaxes. "There are no other customers."

"But I can't—"

"You play something or I'll never speak to you again!" she says, temperamental—though she is more temper than mental.

"All right," I sigh.

But I do not have to play the tuba. There is an unexpected interruption.

As I reach for the tuba, Fanny reaches for her hamburger. Only a snake gets there first. When she looks down, there is a serpent, nibbling at her bun.

"Eeeeeeeek!" she comments.

She grabs for her purse to run, but there happens to be another snake crawling around there. It is staring into the pocket mirror as if it wants to powder its nose.

I STARE around and see that my snakes are breaking loose. The whole hamburger stand seems to be full of them. They smell food and they are wriggling and writhing all over the place.

"Great snakes!" yells the guy behind the counter. He dives for them with his cleaver.

I do not know if he is attacking them or stealing them on account of the meat shortage.

I swing into action, chasing them and trying to stuff the snakes back into my pockets.

"What are you doing?" Fanny shrieks.

"Can't you see?" I gasp. "I'm trying to get them back into my trousers."

She hits me over the head with a bottle of ketchup.

"I'll have nothing to do with a man who keeps snakes in his trousers," she rages.

"But Fanny—" I yell. It is too late. Jumping over the snakes on the floor she starts bawling while they are crawling, and then she runs out of the joint.

I watch the hamburger stand attendant do a little snake dance behind the counter, and then swing into action to catch the wrigglers.

By the time I stuff them back into my pockets I am tired and perspired. I pay for the hamburgers and march out. "A fine kettle of fish," I think. "A fine nest of snakes."

I stumble wearily and drearily home to bed. I take off my clothes and hit the hay without delay. I am in bed a few minutes and then the snakes crawl in with me to keep warm. I am too fagged out to object, and fall sound asleep.

Drinking and fighting and excitement really get me down, I guess, because when I wake up it is very late the next morning. In fact it is so late it is almost twilight of the afternoon.

I bound out of bed, partly because I realize I oversleep, and partly because one of the snakes is trying to coil up in my pajama trousers.

"I must call Ali Ben Alikat," I remember, and dial the Ardlore Hotel and ask for him.

"Mr. Alikat is out," says the room clerk.

"Where is he?" I persist. I must tell him at once that I suspect Herman the German.

"He is meeting a Mr. Herman Sherman," says the room clerk.

"What?" I yell, my heart sinking.

"Mr. Herman Sherman, director of the Cosmopolitan Museum," the clerk adds.

My heart sinks still further. It would take a diving bell to get it back up. Because now I know Herman Sherman must be the guy responsible for this mess. There is no Cosmopolitan Museum in town, and he is luring Ali Ben Alikat into a trap.

I hang up and hang my head.

What can I do?

I must find Ali Ben Alikat. But where? Where is he meeting Herman the German? How can I find out my next move?

Glancing down at the floor, I notice one of the snakes, coiling around the little tin tuba.

And I get an idea.

Ali Ben Alikat tells me to play the tuba when I want a warning or some advice from the serpents!

I may not know which way to turn, but the snakes do.

So I pick up the tuba and begin to blow.

The snakes glide off the bed and onto the floor. I really let go with a blast of reptile hep style.

SURE enough, the snakes glide around for a while and then head in a body for the carpet. All eight of them.

I watch while they form out a word. Just one word.

"FANNY."

It fascinates me to see them arch their backs to form the angles. Then I stare at the message.

"FANNY."

What does it mean? I want to know where to go to find Ali Ben Alikat and they spell out the name of my ex-girl friend. She is mad at me. How can she help? Besides, she is appearing in a ballet tonight at the theatre.

Then I remember—she gives me a ticket to the show. Can it be that I am supposed to go there?

It's a hunch.

I dress in a hurry and then ponder. Should I take the snakes with me? Remembering what happens last night, I don't want to. But from now on I'll need lots of advice.

So I stuff the sacred serpents in my pockets again, grab the tuba, and rush out to the street to grab a cab.

Off to the theatre I go, to catch Fanny before the show starts. She will give me information, if the snakes do not double-cross me.

I head for the stage door and the first person I run into is Fanny's maid, Sciatica.

"Oh Mistah Feep!" yaps Sciatica. "Ah nevah been so glad to see anybody like Ah is you."

"What kind of talk is that—I is you?" I ask.

But Sciatica doesn't bother to explain.

"Sump'n awful's done gone an' happened," she bawls. "Miss Fanny's havin' a hystericals all ovah de place. Mistah Herman Sherman don' show up foh de perfohmanace at all so fah. An' he ain't got no orchestra comin' foh to play tonight, neithah. We is in a mess. Maybe you-all can help Miss Fanny to calm down."

"Lead me to her," I say, and she does.

Fanny is in her dressing-room, in costume, and when I come in she is gnawing at her rhinestones and crying.

"Oh, Lefty!" she sobs. "Isn't it awful? Herman Sherman has left the show in the lurch. We are going on in ten minutes and there's no music. Who ever hears of a ballet without music?"

"Never mind that," I snap. "Where is Herman Sherman?"

She doesn't know.

"Does he ever speak of Ali Ben Ali-kat?" I ask.

"Lefty!" squeaks the girl. "I am in trouble and you ask me about alley cats!"

I frown. Evidently the snakes make mistakes when they direct me here. Fanny does not know anything about Herman the German and his plans.

All she can do is blow about the show.

"Almos' curtain time, Miss Fanny," says Sciatica.

Fanny bawls again. Then she notices that I am carrying my tuba.

"Lefty," she says. "You can save us! This is a modernistic ballet. I am going to be Scheherazade. All I need is a little oriental music. Now if you will play your tuba—"

"But I can't," I pant. "You don't know—"

"Just fake it," she pleads. "Interpretive stuff. Just to please the audience. To save the ballet. My reputation is at stake. Oh you must do this for me, Lefty."

SHE FALLS on my neck. Meanwhile Sciatica falls on me from behind. The two of them just about carry me out to the orchestra pit. They shove me down the steps in the darkness.

I can't escape. I hear the warning buzz. The house is packed. I sit there clutching my tuba, getting ready to run. It all happens too quickly for me—I am bewildered.

Then the curtain rises.

Six chorus girls scamper out against an oriental backdrop and begin to exhibit their oriental backdrops, kicking their legs in unison.

I pick up the tuba and begin to blow into it softly, trying to keep the snakes in my pocket from hearing it.

Meanwhile I watch the stage. After a little scampering around, Fanny

makes her appearance—and that is just what she makes, in the little pile of beads they string together for her costume. She might just as well be back in burlesque.

But the audience gives her a hand and I give her the old tuba. Fanny really works on this, I can tell, because she begins to dance like mad all over the place, jumping and bouncing around.

I realize how hard she is trying and how much this means to her, so I warm up and try to pick out a real tune on the tuba. I blow until I glow, and put my heart and both lungs into my work, until I am blasting away and making as much noise as a whole orchestra.

It is too bad I get so wrapped up in my work. Because when I look at the stage again, it is too late.

Without my noticing it, the snakes creep from my pockets, all eight of them. They head for the stage. Of course they are flat behind the footlights and the audience cannot see them, but the six girls can.

Suddenly their dancing changes. They begin to run. And the snakes chase them. The snakes crawl up their legs while they dance.

In a minute there is no ballet going on any more. There is a good old-fashioned shimmy and hula-hula contest.

Fanny gets her share of attention from the reptiles, too. She screams and shakes, and in a minute Fanny is really wiggling ditto.

The audience begins to howl and hoot and whistle and applaud and the girls begin to shake and quake and quiver and shiver and the snakes begin to worm and squirm and there is one swell riot. Really hell to pay for the ballet.

I stop the tuba but too late. The house comes down with applause.

Then the curtain comes down, and

so do the girl's costumes.

The jig is the only thing that is up.

While the girls run screaming from the stage, I dash up, cursing, and corral the eight snakes.

I have only one idea, and that is to get out of there. Now I know where I stand with Fanny, and all I can do is rave. Those snakes queer my life for me with their bum advice, and I figure the hell with what they spell.

I emerge from the stage-door entrance with only one ambition—to go home and make some snake soup.

But in the alley there is something else cooking.

As I step out, a fat man comes up behind me and begins to scrape at my ribs with a wicked-looking razor.

"Kindly do not sharpen your razor on my spine," I say, mildly.

BUT the guy does not go for this suggestion. Instead he goes for my liver with his knife.

"Hold very still," he advises me.

"You are Lefty Feep, are you not?"

"How do you guess?" I ask.

"Herman tells me to keep on the lookout for a stupid-looking jerk," he comes back.

"Herman!" I exclaim the name. "Herman Sherman?"

"None other, brother," says the fat man. "He sends me to find you."

"I am looking for him, too, I tell the fat party. "And I am looking for Ali Ben Alikat."

The fat man chuckles softly, like an erupting volcano. "You are looking for him, eh?" he remarks. "Well, you will never find him. And it is better for you if you forget there ever is such a person."

"Don't tell me you kill him," I gasp.

"What makes you think that?" inquires the oversized guy.

"I know all about Herman Sherman,"

I blurt out. "I know he is after that sceptre of Haroun Al Raschid. I know he is an Axis agent and that he wants to steal the sceptre and take it back to Iraq to impress the natives there. I know he lures Ali Ben Alikat somewhere by pretending to be the director of a museum."

"You know a lot of things," says Fatty. "In fact you know almost too much. But I know a couple of things about you, too."

"For instance?"

"For instance, you have the sacred snakes that come from under the Kaaba stone," the guy tells me. "And you play a tuba so that the snakes will spell out words and give advice. That is why I am here to interview you. I must take those snakes with me."

He reaches into my pockets and grabs a handful of squirmers. I do not object, because he keeps his razor very close to my spinal cord.

"Why do you want the snakes?" I ask, politely.

"Because I will take them to this Ali Ben Alikat and tell him you are really the Axis agent who is on his trail. I will tell him you engineer that attack in the tavern last night. I will help Herman Sherman to convince him he should turn over the sceptre to us. You see, right now he believes Herman Sherman is from the museum. Once he hears you are the Axis agent he will be so grateful to us that we will get the sceptre without any violence. And we hate violence," says the guy, jabbing me with the razor and laughing.

I shiver and look down the deserted alley as he takes the rest of the snakes.

"Now hand me the tuba," suggests Fatso. I do so.

"That takes care of things, I think," he tells me. "Oh, just one thing more. I owe you this for hitting me with the sceptre in the tavern last night."

And he raps me over the skull with the tuba.

Never before do I know a tuba can produce such music. There is a ringing and a roaring in my ears and I go down for the count in the alley as the fat party scrams.

He waits until a car drives up and then hops in and beats it to the hide-out of Herman the German. This turns out to be the cellar of an old house over on 22nd Street.

The reason I know this is because I am hanging on to the spare tire and rear bumper. I manage to crawl on my hands and knees when the car pulls up in the alley, and I hang there for dear life as we drive through the dark streets. I am woozy and weak, but I know I must go through with this.

WE PULL up in front of this dark house. It looks sleepy but creepy. Fatty and the chauffeur get out and go down the steps to a cellar entrance. I quietly fall off my perch and crawl up to the cellar window on my hands and knees.

I look in and see a candle flickering on a table in the dingy cellar room.

Fatty and the chauffeur are inside talking to a little baldheaded lout who is strictly from sauerkraut. I guess this must be Herman the German. He is waving his arms, and when he sees the snakes and the tuba he rubs his hands and glances at a wristwatch.

Evidently Ali Ben Alikat does not arrive yet, because I do not see him on the premises.

After a little pantomime, the three of them leave the room. The snakes and the tuba are on a table. The snakes crawl around, and so do I.

I crawl up and test the cellar window. It gives. In a moment I am inside the cellar room. I reach for the tuba and pocket it. Then I grab for the snakes,

but there are footsteps outside. The Axis axes are returning.

Up to and out of the window I go, with just the tuba, and I hide in the bushes. But they are in the room before I can close the cellar window again.

Herman the German notices it is open.

"Himmel!" he yells. "Somebody in here sneaking is! Somebody crawls the window through and the tuba steals."

"Looks that way," says the fat party. "Wonder why?"

"*Dumkopf*, do you not standunder?" yells Herman the German. "When Ali Ben Alikat here comes this enemy will the tuba play so the snakes will him warn, *nein*?"

"You mean you believe that wild story about these snakes?" asks the fat lug. "That they can curl themselves up into letters and spell out a warning?"

"They can of course so do," says Herman. "But Ali Ben Alikat must not a warning get. He will in a few minutes arrive and we must before then the snakes gefix."

"How do you intend to gefix the ge-snakes?" asks the chauffeur, a thin droop.

"Thus and so," says Herman the German. He stares at the snakes and produces a bottle of whiskey.

"Whiskey?" gurgles the fat personality. "That's for snake-bites, isn't it? These snakes can't bite anybody."

"I dunno," says the chauffeur. "They look like adders to me."

"They can't do mathematics too, can they?" asks the fat party.

"Never mind," Herman the German snarls. "I am going to the snakes gefix so they will give a warning won't, *nein*?"

Staring at the snakes, he pours a part of the whiskey on the table in a pool.

I get his idea and I am horrified.

The snakes are petrified. At least, they are in a few minutes. Because they begin to lap up the whiskey. In a few minutes more they will be too drunk to spell any words, no matter how I play the tuba. My little scheme is knocked flat.

And it looks like I will be knocked flat myself.

Because Herman the German turns to the fat party and says, "Now you will out go and the grounds search. If the party who crawls through the window you find, you will please his throat cut. *Nein?*"

And Fatty nods and brings out his razor. He heads for the door. But as he does so, Ali Ben Alikat, wearing his nightie, walks up the path and down the cellar steps.

FATTY is at the door so I dare not call out. Ali Ben Alikat goes into the den of thieves.

The jig is definitely up.

Herman Sherman gives him a bow and a nod and a greasy smile and Ali Ben Alikat gives him the sceptre.

At least he pulls it out of his garter and holds it up. The golden sceptre of Haroun Al Raschid glitters in the dim light and so do the eyes of the three Axis agents.

Then he notices the snakes, lapping whiskey on the table. Fatty starts to tell him the fake story—how I am really an Axis agent and arrange this attack on him, and how he finds me and takes the snakes away again. Ali doesn't know what to believe, but I can see he is falling for it.

"I appreciate your kindness," says Ali. "Making this meeting a secret so Feep and his gang will not discover us. And on behalf of my government I present you, as Director of Cosmopolitan Museum, with this sacred relic—the veritable sceptre of Haroun Al Ra-

schid, Caliph of Bagdad, Protector of the Poor, Lord of —"

"What is?" yells Herman the German, suddenly.

Because I am crouching outside the window, blowing the tuba. I know the snakes are drunk, but I hope against hope. It is all I can do, against three men.

And my effort is in vain. The snakes are really woozy by now. Nobody could read their writhing.

They squirm a bit when they hear my tune, but all at once they just lie still. They do not form any words. Some are all curled up in a ball and others just lie out straight, full length.

But no words.

No hope.

Nothing!

The dervish squints at them when he hears the music. The Axis agents stare at Ali Ben Alikat. He shrugs, stares at the snakes, and smiles.

Then he hands them the sceptre.

Herman the German reaches for it.

And suddenly the dervish starts to whirl!

I never see a whirling dervish in action before, and it is something to behold.

Ali Ben Alikat spins himself like a top. He stands there, turning around faster and faster until you can not see his face or figure—just a whirling body with a blowing beard. And as he whirls he moves. He moves forward, fast.

His figure, like a human top, careens into Herman the German and knocks him over a table. Fatty gets out his razor, but somehow Ali Ben Alikat, still whirling, grabs the sceptre and bounces it off the fat party's skull.

The chauffeur has a pistol in his hand by this time—and I come through the window just in time to grab it.

Ali Ben Alikat, whirling like mad, pockets the snakes as they lie coiled

up and stretched out. He waves the sceptre in farewell. Maybe it is just a dervish trick, but he spins faster and faster and faster—and then he isn't there any more.

Yes, the dervish disappears into thin air. One last twist and he is gone.

I am left holding a pistol, pointing it at the three Axis agents on the floor.

So it works out, after all.

I turn them over to the authorities right away. Ali Ben Alikat saves his sceptre. Everything is strictly on the up and up once more.

The way it turns out later, I discover that Fanny isn't even sore at me about the snakes.

It seems the owner of the Oasis—the Sneak of Araby—happens to be in the audience at the ballet and when he sees her shimmy he signs her up at a big salary for the cafe.

So she is practically back in burlesque after all, and I am tops with her again.

Yes, everything works out for the best, because those clever snakes warn Ali Ben Alikat.

* * *

L EFTY Feep sat back, but not for long.

I grabbed him by the collar.

"Listen," I snapped. "How could those snakes warn the dervish? I thought they were drunk."

"Only pretending," Lefty told me. "They are smart, see?"

"You mean they spelled out a word when you played the tuba outside the window?"

"Right," Feep told me. "When I play the tuba, they tell Ali Ben Alikat to beware."

"But you said the Germans didn't see any word," I persisted.

Feep smiled. "Of course not," he chuckled. "The snakes are very clever. They know they are in the hands of the enemy. So this time they don't spell out a word regularly. Remember, I mention some of them are curled up in a ball and others are stretched out full length?"

"You mean—?"

"Exactly," said Lefty Feep. "The sacred snakes spell out their warning in a new way I teach them before they are stolen. They give Ali Ben Alikat an S.O.S.—but this time they do it in Morse Code!"

THE END

Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of Fantastic Adventures, published bi-monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for Oct. 1, 1943. State of Illinois, County of Cook, ss. Before me, a notary public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. T. Pullen, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of Fantastic Adventures and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor and business managers are: Publisher, William B. Ziff, 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.; Editor, B. G. Davis, 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.; Managing Editor, Raymond Palmer, 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.; Business Manager, A. T. Pullen, 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill. 2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.; W. B. Ziff Co., 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.; William B. Ziff, 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.; B. G. Davis, 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.; A. Ziff, 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.; S. Davis, 540 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: (If there are none, so state.) None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. 5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only.) A. T. Pullen, Business Manager. (Signature of business manager.)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1943.

(Seal.) Mae Harris, Notary Public. (My commission expires Sept. 11, 1944.)



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No, cross it out. Joe might not understand about the topcoat, especially if

he's shivering in a damp Japanese cell.

Let's try again. "Dear Joe, I've been working pretty hard and haven't had a vacation in over a year, so . . ."

Better cross that out, too. They don't ever get vacations where Joe's staying.

Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, write the letter to Joe. Try to write it, anyhow.

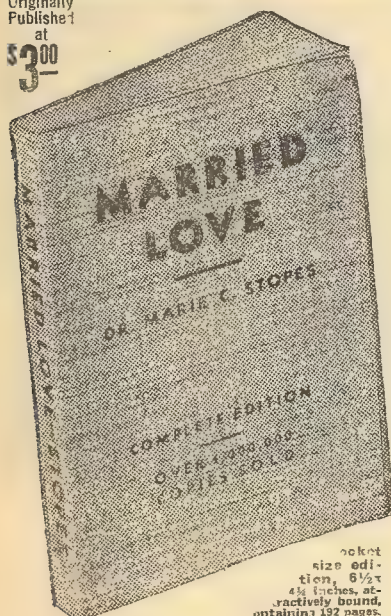
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READER'S PAGE

ANOTHER YERXA FAN

Sirs:

Just finished reading the December issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and would like to add that I've been reading FA only about three months and found no other mag that can even begin to compare. The stories are of the type that I really go for. The following is a list of stories from the December issue which were really good.

First, there's "Witch of Blackfen Moor," which I thought quite interesting. Second, I like "Spawn of the Glacier," which is the type of story that really holds my interest. The rest were all fair. As for Leroy Yerxa, I think he's tops; he really knows how to hold you in interest. Very good at description, and really puts the idea across. Above all, keep Leroy Yerxa! I read George W. Hall's letter and it really made me mad. Keep FA in there, it's swell!

Lester Kelo
15106 Turlington Ave.
Harvey, Ill.

Glad to see you found so much entertainment in FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. Yes, as you say, Leroy Yerxa is tops. His recent progress has amazed even your editors!—Ed.

A SEQUEL?

Sirs:

In your magazine FANTASTIC ADVENTURES of October, I read "Warrior Maids of Libya" by Leroy Yerxa. I enjoyed the story very much, but the ending definitely no. I would appreciate knowing if the author intends to write a sequel to the story, or does he just intend to leave it as it is.

If he intends to write a sequel to it, please let me know in what month's magazine you intend to print it.

Hoping to hear from you soon.

Sgt. Walter J. Greczynski
Military Secret,
U. S. A.

Mr. Yerxa confesses he had a sequel in mind, but it'll have to be good to get by us. Sequels usually turn out to be anti-climactical. However, we shall see.—Ed.

A MORALE BUILDER

Sirs:

In your issue dated December, 1943, which is, incidentally, the first (but by no means the last) copy of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES I've read, there were two stories, by different writers, each con-

taining as the main character a bat-winged, or shall I say, Satan-winged girl. I was really gratefully amazed at the two stories, which, though having the same motif, were so widely different in their general scope.

Really, in this respect, your magazine is unique, as generally one glimpses at least some similarity of plot-design when a thing like this happens in the writing world! The stories to which I refer are, respectively, "Witch of Blackfen Moor," by Lee Francis, and "Cloak of Satan" by Frank Patton. The first mentioned had a British background, while the latter was supposed to take place in New York. Each story was perfect, in its way, and I especially liked their endings.

"The Wooden Ham," by Morris J. Steele, was a gem. It belongs in some anthology of "best short stories of 1943." It had just enough of the religious atmosphere to set one a-thinking! A masterpiece, if there ever was one! I've read it through several times, and expect to read it often, to sort of "bolster up" my morale. I, too, have a soldier boy "somewhere," doing his bit for Uncle Sam—and this story provides me with more faith than I ever thought possible! Bless the writer!

Mrs. Muriel E. Eddy
383 Friendship Street
Providence 7, R. I.

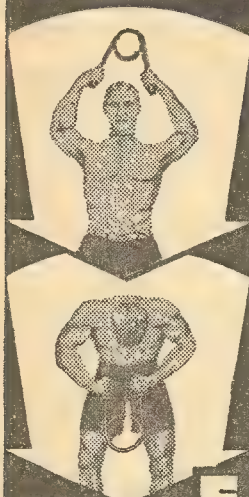
You can't imagine how good your letter makes us feel. Letters like yours build our morale, too—because we like to know that our efforts at giving you the best fiction possible in these times bear good fruit.—Ed.

A SEVERE (AND MISTAKEN) CRITIC

Sirs:

You, sir, brag of having the largest circulation in the STF. and Fantasy field with your 2 mags. However you appeal only to a certain class of readers. Those from the ages of 4 to 12. You will never find a true fantasy fan reading your publication. Most of your readers are the wide-mouthed instead of the wide awake type. Anyone who would read such awful trash as Jewels of the Toad, Horse on Lefty Feep. Shades of the old *Amazing Stories* (pre 1933). You say that you try to appeal to your readers. Remember however that your own *Amazing Stories* between 1926-30 sold over 100,000 copies a month. And there was a lot of difference between them and you. You say that the old classics can't come up to today's tales. When will your magazine publish another Moon Pool? Another Skylark? Another White Lily. How many stories like that have

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you published? I'll tell you sir. None!

You appeal to your reader solely because he or she doesn't read another publication (Stf). Either by the time they have read FANTASTIC ADVENTURES they are tired of Stf. or they graduate into the type that reads good science-fiction.

Think it over carefully Mister Editor. Think it over. You were a Stf. fan yourself once. Also find what your readers think of this.

A Fan,

411 S. Fess

Bloomington, Indiana

Now we know you're kidding! If so, all is forgiven. But if you mean it . . . well we gotta up and defend ourselves and the rest of our readers who disagree with you. First, where did you get the 100,000 figure? Oh, Mr. Fan, what fantasy! We would hate to tell you how horrible the circulation was when we bought the magazine, but it is more than four times as large now. And it certainly never was as high as you say. We believe you have been listening to hearsay, which is never accurate. Next, we disagree about our readers, and their mouths. For example, Professor Haas, of Notre Dame University, called on us one day to express the pleasure he obtained from reading Amazing Stories and FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. He is just one of many famous men who read us. We have many juvenile readers, yes, and we give them good juvenile stories, in direct proportion. But the fact is, the juvenile story of today is the adult story of pre 1933. As for good stories, matching any you mention, what about "The Whispering Gorilla," "Doorway To Hell," "The Vengeance Of Martin Brand," "Black World," "Sons Of The Deluge," and countless others? All acclaimed by our readers as classics. Your reason for our appeal is very confusing. Do you mean we appeal because we are the only magazine the reader reads? We should be very flattered if that's what you mean. Yes, we were a fan once, and still are. Also, we have a feeling our readers will answer your letter in this column—but remember, you asked for it!—Ed.

OUR SCHEDULE

Sirs:

I have all the FANTASTIC ADVENTURES magazines printed up to August 1943. The August issue stated that there would be no Sept. issue but there would be an October issue, but I haven't seen it on the stand. Did I miss it somehow? Have you printed any issues after the August issue?

I just bought a Nov. *Amazing Stories*. Will there be a Dec. issue? The Nov. issue does not say when the next issue will hit the stand. I sure am going crazy trying to keep up with the set-up you are forced to keep on account of the paper shortage.

I also just bought the special issue of *Flying* on the Army Air Forces At War. It was the best of the specials *Flying* has put out so far. By the way I have 5 special issues of *Flying*.

1. Army Air Forces
2. Navy Air Forces
3. R.A.F.

4. Navy Air Forces At War

5. Army Air Forces At War

Have there been any other specials like these by *Flying*?

Can you tell me where I can buy a copy of the book—"Dwellers In The Mirage" by Abraham Merritt. Price no object.

Tony Riccardi
5718 So. Gramercy Pl.
Los Angeles 37, Calif.

Yes, there was an October issue of *F.A.* And a December. The magazine is bi-monthly, and you will find February, April, June, August, etc. on sale, unless further changes are made. *Amazing Stories* alternates with *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES*. *Mammoth Detective* is quarterly, a February issue being on the stands now. Yes, you have all the special issues of *Flying*. Great stuff, aren't they! *Radio News* has had a special issue, too. Our subscription department can supply any issues you have missed, of all our magazines. We believe "Dwellers In The Mirage" is out of print, but perhaps one of our readers has a copy for sale? They may see this and write you.—Ed.

CONTROVERSEY ON ARTISTS

Sirs:

Waible asks for controversy in the Reader's Page of the October issue. (I know I am a bit late, but have only now been able to get around to reading it.) I am happy to oblige: F. A. does not need Bok. No one, with the possible exception of a family of his own, needs Bok. Cartier is far superior to Bok, for that type of drawing, but Finlay and Magarian do fine for F. A. Bok is a much better author than artist for the competition he can meet nowadays.

Speaking of pics—how about those for the Tink, Jing and Nastee story this time? Did that artist even glance at the story? He shows no signs of it, if so. I add my name to the numberless Lefty Feep fans; he is pure corn, but somehow fascinating, from the Rip van Winkle episode on.

FANTASTIC is far better than *Amazing* (see my subconscious rating by the caps I used), which goes in for too much plain hack. A transplanted Western of some time back can still make me shudder. Galloping caterpillar-cycles! However, I am one of the addicts, and can't pass up any of the mags. Keep up such stories as "World of the Paper Dolls" and "Mystery of the Creeping Underwear" and you will be right at the top in my private list. "Jewels of the Toad" was somehow reminiscent of "Other Worlds"; have to check back and see who wrote that. Tarleton Fiske is good and so far not getting "typed" in his plots.

Notice two articles by Carter Wainwright in this issue; the one on bees is enthralling. This reminds me—please don't have the back cover article turned into a story; it is far too good just as is. Something different.

This letter has "just growed" into a huge thing, so had better sign off now.

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On reading this over, I must add that I meant no slam at Finlay and Magarian or at F. A. I merely meant that F. A. does not go in much for the horror type of stuff which Carter and Bok are best at.

H. I. LARSEN,
Box 747,
Glenns Ferry, Idaho

Your letter needs no comment, except to say we are glad you like our present artists. As for Timk and Jing, we had the story written around the illustrations, and it must have been McGivern's pre-enlistment rush of work that made him go so far astray—or else it was that last fifth of Scotch!
—Ed.

ASHAMED OF FAIRY TALES?

Sirs:

Have just read the latest issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. The stories are quite good so far though I didn't finish all the stories, but the lure of The Reader's Page was too much for me.

My favorite stories are those short funny ones, I look for them the minute I get the mag.

About your covers, or is it the covers? Just "why" Mr. Editor do some of us look around the magazine rack, spy our unusual mags then look furtively around to see if anyone notices, roll it up and say, "Here's twenty-five cents for this magazine," and hope to God he doesn't insist on looking at it? Why is that? Are we ashamed to be caught reading magazines that run a close second to fairy tales? Why the August issue actually did have a fairy tale story with fairies and all.

How about you Mr. Editor? I can just see you about to meet some very practical, hard-headed business man.

"And what is your business Mr. Rap?"

"Oh, er . . . I'm an editor, yes an editor," you reply in a Gertrude Steinish way.

"Good, good," replies hard-head. "One of the slicks I presume."

"Well, er, not exactly. It's a—a pulp mag, heh, heh. Someone has to give the ignorant public what they want."

Hard-head frowns at this. "Just what is the name of your magazine?" he says, nailing you down.

"It's," flushing a violent red, "it's FANTASTIC ADVENTURES," and you await the explosion.

"You don't say!" replies hard-head, while you try to recover from a slapped back. "Ya know, I've been readin' 'em since I was a kid."

Wasn't that cute?

Never mind, someday not too far off we may be traveling to other worlds and you will have to change your title as it won't be "fantastic" any longer.

VIDA C. SCHNEIDER,
77 Chester Place,
Yonkers, New York.

When you stop to think that three million peo-

ple read these "fairy tales" each month, perhaps you'll be proud to have it known that you possess the high imagination necessary to enjoy this type of fiction! Why should you feel ashamed to do what three million others do? As for your editor, he once turned down a job on a slick magazine, because he was so damned proud of his "fairy tales"!—Ed.

A LIST OF FAVORITES

Sirs:

Having read only ten issues of your magazine, I have already come to the conclusion that it is the finest of its kind on the market today. No other fantasy magazine that I know of (and I've read quite a few) can compete with yours successfully. To sum it up in four words: FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is tops.

Beginning from November, these are my criticisms—

November—"When Freeman Shall Stand" was the best I've read in years. "G. O. of Lefty Feep" and "Talu's Fan" were also swell.

December—"Lost City of Burma" was terrific. Keep it up. Others that were almost as good: "Pegasus Plays Priorities" and of course "Lefty Feep and the S. T. G."

January—The best this month was "The Man With Five Lives" and runner up was "Sammy Calls a Noobus."

February—My choice this month was McGivern's novelet, "The Whispering Gorilla" was good.

March—Well, this month it was a tie between "The Enchanted Bookshelf" and "Drummers of Daugavo."

April—"Furlough from Eternity" and "Merchant of Venus" were the best.

May—Bregle's "Return to Lilliput" was wonderful. Blade's short was pretty good.

June—Well, this issue just about topped them all. Everyone of them deserves a compliment, especially "Citadel of Hate," "Genie of Bagdad" and "Stenton's Shadow."

July—I must admit that this month was a bit of a disappointment. Only Bloch's character and "Caverns of Time" saved it from being a flop.

August—This month really made up for July. "The Star Shepherd" and "You Can't Kid Lefty Feep" led, with "Chariot of Death" and "World Beyond Belief" next.

It was a sorry moment when I read that you would have to slow down the production of F. A. Hope you'll be able to run on schedule soon.

KATHLEEN MAUNSBACH,
939 Eighth Ave.,
New York, N. Y.

Thanks for them kind woids, Kathleen.—Ed.

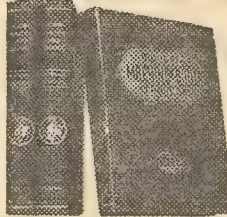
LARGE PLANETS AND SMALL

Sirs:

There are a few things on my mind which I would like to get settled.

1. A. I have read in F. A. and in A. S. of the inhabitants of huge planets having a difficult time

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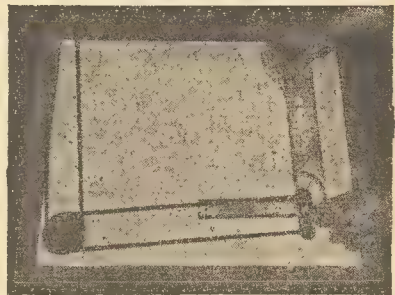


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in walking, running, etc., on their own planet.

B. From same books, only with stories of a small planet where strangely shaped buildings were erected due to the small gravity of that planet. Question: Don't our esteemed authors (?) ever take time out to *think*? Doesn't it seem fairly simple that were the planet large or small its occupants would also be relatively "large or small" as would the weights of said occupants along with minerals etc.? Either I'm wrong or the authors are. Please tell me which.

2. I would certainly like trimmed edges even if this raised the cost a nickel or so.

3. You have said that authors sometimes build a story around an illustration and vice versa. Would the artists kindly read the story they are going to illustrate, also vice versa? I have come across a few stories where one or more characters were not illustrated as they were said to be, in the story.

4. Please put more science in your stories and kindly refuse to even look at any story that mentions this war! I am not trying to ignore this war, but you read about it no matter what type of magazine you buy. Most people read to forget temporarily what is going on about them. It is almost an impossible task to accomplish these days. Why not help us out? Keep this war out of your mags.

Now a few bouquets—As to the Oct. ish my ratings are:

1. "World of the Paper Dolls." I see Mr. Wilcox is improving.

2. "Jewels of the Toad." More like this. Really swell, but too short!

3. "Warrior Maids of Libya." Don't desecrate your mag with such drawings. The illustration completely discouraged me. But the story was O.K.

As to the rest of them, I've read better science fiction stories, or would you prefer to call them fantasy, in the comic papers.

Special mention to Finlay and Magarian "pics." More of them. More "Gluekstein Humor" please, and make with Lefty Feep.

A PLEASED FAN,
2409 Federal St.,
Camden, N. J.

There is an axiomatic scientific law that is called the law of inverse squares. If you double the size and mass of an object, it takes four times the energy to move it. That's why larger planets (where gravity is increased four-fold along a progressive scale, starting with that of Earth as a basis—i.e., twice the size of Earth, four times the gravity, four times the size of Earth, sixteen times the gravity, and so on) have smaller people, according to our authors. They simply want to make it credible that the poor guys can move at all, or even breathe! So, offhand, your theory is the one in error, except for things we haven't the space of knowledge to explain. These phenomena are ticklish even for Einstein to understand. As for the war, stories without war in them, or its influence, would somehow not be credible. And yet, we give



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you variety. Seven of our eight stories this month don't breathe a word of the war!—Ed.

"EFFRONTERY"

Sirs:

After four years away from science-fiction, I happened across a copy of the October issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and my homecoming was a fiasco. Why? Primarily because of the crummy job McGivern did in: "Tink Fights the Gremlins." Nothing is more outraging than the sound of an author thrashing in an unfamiliar jungle of words. Mr. M. evidently does not know much about aeronautics. I'm no expert either, but I don't have the effrontery to write for a reputedly scientific fiction publication and make statements like: "the reconnaissance plane, both motors dead, glided for a forced landing at 300 miles an hour!" (Eighty-per-hour would be more accurate.) Nor would I place my hero up at 35,000 feet and then announce a storm was approaching and the temperature "would drop 50° in a few minutes." At 35,000 feet the temperature is a constant—67°.

Finally, a word on the accompanying illustration on p. 116. Although the author states that 2 leprechauns were busy fighting off a lion from the inert body of our hero, artist Magarian evidently was too bored to translate the thought into English. He drew three leprechauns and had them using swords and daggers instead of thorns.

This is by no means all that could be said, but it's all any reader wants to say on such a pill.

The best story in the issue is "World of the Paper Dolls," a novel showing excellent use of diction and a sense of timing and suspense that makes the rest of the issue regrettable by comparison.

A/C GERRY TURNER,
Ellington Field, Texas.

First, we admit you are perfectly correct about the facts in McGivern's story. We should have caught them in editing, too. But really, the story wasn't a "pill" just because of those technical errors, was it? Naturally, McGivern trod on your toes there, but we hope that didn't spoil the story as a story, for you? What if "World of Paper Dolls" had contained those aeronautical errors? Would you have panned that yarn? The real laugh here is that McGivern wanted to join the air force at the time he wrote the story!—Ed.

NO GOOD?—GOOD!

Sirs:

I have just finished the Dec. issue, and thought it was pretty bad. I have begun reading your mag. for only four months. I'm happy about your mag. I like only fantastic stuff. This is how I rate your stories:

- 1—"Professor Cyclone," good mystery.
- 2—"Witch of Blackfen Moor," scary and good. More of this type.
- 3—"You Can Say That Again," swell short story.



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- 4—"Jones Buys War Blondes." More of this Jones.
- 5—"Freddie Funk's Seven League Boots." No good.
- 6—"Pearl Handled Poison." Terrible.
- 7—"Cloak of Satan." No rime or reason to it.
- 8—"Spawn of the Glacier." Rates "0."
- 9—"The Wooden Ham." Too short, no room for story.
- 10—"Heroes Die Hard." Never did enjoy "Gade's" stories. Please better issues, or there will be one reader less.

HERBY BELL,
2195 East 22 St.,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

You liked four out of ten stories, and they were quite long, fully half the book. We'd say we had a pleased reader! But honestly, we'll try to give you even more of the type you like! We appreciate frank comment.—Ed.

DEFINITIONS!

Sirs:

The effort of readers to achieve definition rises again in print. Likewise the two extremes of definition in which one reader in "Readers Page" says most readers are stupid and another writer claims his immediate circle of fan acquaintances are 25% above average in intelligence.

I doubt if either claim is true or even pertinent, except as they serve to illustrate the factor that seems common to most readers of science fiction and fantasy. This might be called "maladjustment." Carried to unhappy extremes that is associated with a padded cell! However, it has also been called "Divine Discontent"! In short, most of your readers are rebels whom circumstance will discipline and eventually regiment into conformity . . . OR . . . they will discipline circumstance and regiment it into conformity with themselves. In yet other words, an aggregation of budding genius and . . . er . . . ripening "nuts"! Only time and experiment can with certainty differentiate one from the other!

Science-fiction and fantasy are "escape mechanism" stories. True enough. So is most all fiction literature. But the preferences in form and subject matter of such escape mechanisms expressed by readers is quite significant and intensely interesting.

I have conceived a sincere and friendly regard for you as editor, for that matter, based upon the same sort of analysis of your comment and even more so upon your choice of material. All your stories glorify and dramatize **COURAGE** . . . the refusal to accept defeat. Moreover, in both **AMAZING** and **FANTASTIC** you have quite consistently avoided the morbid.

In fact, in December **FANTASTIC ADVENTURES** I have the first bone to pick with you in a long long time. Both "Witch of Blackfen Moor" and "Cloak of Satan" annoyed me profoundly. The implications of ideas presented.

I would not have minded "Cloak of Satan" at all . . . in fact I would have approved of it . . . if as a final scene Satan had appeared in the background to pull a kindly grin and quietly watch the victorious lovers embrace.

"Witch of Blackfen Moor" was just plain PUTRID . . . not as a story . . . but as a mental viewpoint . . . an idea pattern.

If, for the sake of speculative thought, you will allow my hypothesis that most readers of science-fiction and fantasy are REBELS . . . individuals who refuse to accept the idea that ALL the pattern of circumstance is "right" . . . then pause and consider also that SATAN is the ancient symbol of rebellion.

It is neither your fault nor mine that the symbolic significance of Deity and Anti-deity have been hopelessly tangled. Men who have sought power by any means at hand. Men who have sought the substance of self-esteem in the SEEMING of outward pretense . . . men who have LOST the battle WITHIN . . . and sought in futile symbolism to win it in outward seeming . . . Hitlers and their lesser counterparts . . . have tangled the semantics of Deity and Anti-deity, since they sought in Deity the AUTHORITY to command obedience to themselves as REPRESENTATIVES of divine authority . . . that they might thereby enhance the seeming of their own pretense and in the dramatization of seeming find their own personal company more admirable.

Much of that symbolism was created under times and conditions in which men were ruled by kinds and absolute and highly centralized government. Therefore, Deity was presented as the advocate of blind obedience. Quite unavoidably Satan became the advocate of individual initiative, experiment, experience, the acquisition of knowledge, and of personal development and growth.

BECAUSE such men have in hypocrisy tangled the semantic values . . . I have no choice but to take my stand beside SATAN . . . in kindly understanding of human error . . . and in militant advocacy of experiment, experience, individual initiative and individual development. Whether they so candidly state the matter or not . . . I think many of your readers feel the same way. At heart they are REBELS.

Therefore, I OBJECT most bitterly to a Satan who exhibits the avid lascivious lust of an adolescent boy! Really, after all these thousands and thousands of years! The direct implication is to deny the possibility of learning anything by experience! Don't you think Satan should have developed a rather mature intellect AND CHARACTER by this time . . . even if he was originally the wayward child of Adoni . . . the problem child of the Celestial Family!

WHAT utility would RULE over the whole world have for Satan . . . or any one else? EXCEPT to elaborate the fabric of PRETENSE and seeming! Utterly illogical! If Satan is the sym-

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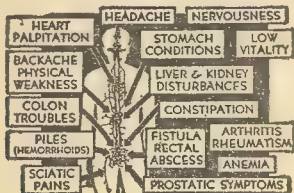
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bolic advocate of experiment . . . the implication is unavoidable that he can learn from experiment. IN SO LONG A TIME . . . I think Satan would evolve a philosophy something like this:

"NOW I see I must live with myself forever. One cannot maintain pretense so long a time! Except I be lovable, even an admirable companion, HOW shall I bear mine own company?"

Hard-boiled . . . infinitely ruthless perhaps, but with an understanding twinkle in his eyes!

Let I offend some one who is devout and quite literal in religious viewpoint . . . consider then the integrity of an Omnipotent Deity . . . would HE ever really permit actual opposition? 'Tain't logical. Satan "The Rebel" could only exist as a servant who carried out his part of a plan! And Satan would then be a guy with a very hard and dirty job who did it faithfully!

As far as I am concerned, it is all symbolism. As such I object to tangling the symbolism of Satan the Rebel . . . with items that are simply psychosis.

Horns, tail and all, I insist on seeing Satan as a rather nice old fella who rules wearily over a hell where the pious and sanctified and the smugly comfortable dwell in all the seeming of pomp, power and outward pretense time without end . . . until they get FED UP to where it is sheer torture . . . and they are willing to face REALITY. IF that seems remarkably like the "Heaven" some folks talk about . . . well . . . I said the semantics were tangled long, long ago! I do not expect ya to teach philosophy in a fiction mag, but ya CAN exercise a bit of discretion.

GEORGE A. FOSTER,
P. O. Box 188,
Stoughton, Mass.

As far as our readers are concerned, it seems to be 50% of one and half-a-dozen of the other. When we come to defining the Devil, there you can argue till doomsday! You disliked Francis' and Patton's stories because his concept of the Devil (admittedly it could be screwy) differed from yours. Yet, these two stories got more raves than any stories published in the past year! Thus, we must disagree with you—without any personalities entering into it; our concept of the Devil would be still another concept!—Ed.

SOME QUESTIONS

Sirs:

"When Freeman Shall Stand" was in my opinion the best F. A. story ever to appear in your mag. In AMAZING, I'll take "Warrior of the Dawn" and "Vengeance of Martin Brand." Why doesn't Irwin hurry up and get old Martin out of the fix that he's in. To tell the truth I like it where the hero dies.

My favorite authors are Ed. Hamilton (my favorite), Don Wilcox, Brett Sterling, E. R. Burroughs (respectively), Nelson S. Bond, and Dave W. O'Brien.

Let's have another long novel by Nelson S. Bond and please, if possible, a Hawk Carse story.

Your best cover artist for the back is James B. Settles.

If anyone has "Master Mind of Mars" I'll be more than glad to buy it.

JAMES AYERS,
609 First St.,
Attalla, Ala.

Irwin is working on the second of the Martin Brand stories. He tells us there will be three, altogether! Bond is a busy man, these days. But maybe, we'll be getting one from him before long. Hawk Carse is in the services of Uncle Sam, so we'll have to wait.—Ed.

DIFFERENT ARTISTS . . .

Sirs:

Heartiest congratulations on the Finlay illustrations you've been rationing out to us since the worthy Virgil left our ranks for those of the army; believe me, they're a real boost to fan morale. The latest (Dec. FA—pp. 26-27) is typical of him, a happy blend of the weird and the beautiful such as only Finlay can achieve. These drawings are definitely the brightest spot in your art department just now; keep 'em coming.

But about that back cover—I have a bone to pick with you. Not only regarding this painting but also several others in recent months. You started your back cover series with "Life on Other Worlds," you'll recall, and had artist Paul create various weird life-forms. In "Cities of Other Worlds," these odd beings were depicted in their surroundings—and each type of creature was the same for any given planet in *both* series. Settles' "Transportation of Other Worlds" series continued to carry out the tradition. But in the current "Warriors of Other Worlds" series, the beings shown have **NOTHING** in common with their prototypes of the earlier paintings!

Take this month for example. "Life on Mercury" (FA Nov. '39) depicts a bright red, roughly insectile Mercurian, quite unhuman. "Quartz City on Mercury" (AS Sept. '41) shows the same beings in one of their cities—but this month's "Warrior of Mercury"!

Please, gentlemen, let's be consistent. Settles in his transportation series was willing to use Paul's creations, for some of his paintings anyway; why won't Smith?

PAUL CARTER,
156 S. University St.,
Blackfoot, Idaho.

Artist Smith apparently is not a conformist. He has his own ideas. But we hope Paul will be back after the war!—Ed.

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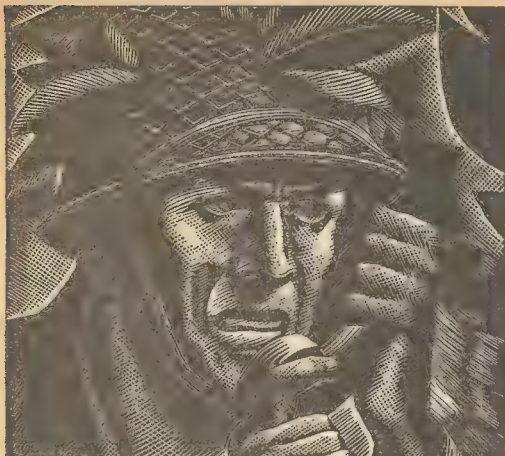
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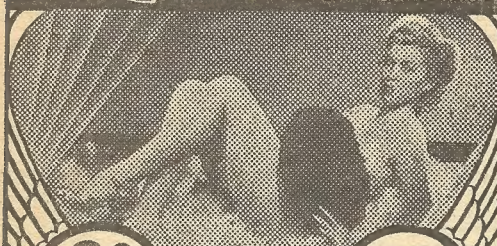


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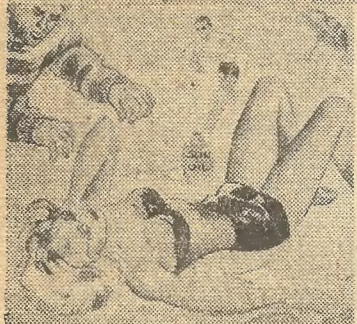
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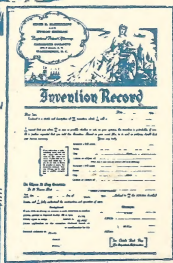
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